

Youths Aging Out of Foster Care and their Experiences
Learning Mindfulness in an Arts-Based Group Program

by

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Abstract

As the field of research investigating mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) continues to expand, studies implementing MBIs with older marginalized youth are scarce. I developed and explored the implementation of an innovative MBI with a small group of youth transitioning out of foster care due to their age. In general, these youth remain underrepresented in qualitative research processes, furthering their public “invisibility” and hampering our understanding of their long-term health and education outcomes. Since we know that many youth in care suffer a variety of long term negative consequences due to experiences of trauma, loss, and family dysfunction, and because we lack understanding regarding beneficial programs for these youth, research is necessary to support policies and programs that promote the resilience of youth in care. I was interested in better understanding these youths’ viewpoints about resilience, and their understanding of mindfulness. The lack of research exploring MBIs with youth aging out of foster care necessitated an exploratory approach.

Applying qualitative inquiry and a constructivist lens, I collected data from eight participants who participated in two different groups. I interviewed the youths using open-ended questions in three semi-structured interviews prior to, immediately after, and four months following participation in a holistic 10-week arts-based mindfulness group program. A follow-up meeting was held with all of the youth one year after the groups were completed. Using an inductive form of interpretive thematic analysis, my analysis of the data yielded themes illustrating the participants’ perceptions of the challenges that they endured; the key features of resilience; their understanding of mindfulness; the benefits of learning mindfulness; and the perceived helpfulness of the group experience.

These findings helped me to illustrate new insights about the benefits, challenges, and opportunities afforded by implementing MBIs with older youth in care. I found that the arts-based mindfulness group program was suitable and the youth expressed several benefits of learning mindfulness for their day-to-day lives including increased self-awareness and improved emotion regulation. The implications for service providers and other allies of marginalized youth are considered, and recommendations for future researchers are provided.

Keywords: arts-based, care leavers, fun, holistic, marginalized, mindfulness, mutual aid, youth in care, foster care, resilience, social support, thematic analysis, aging out of care, group work

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Table of Contents

THESIS DEFENSE COMMITTEE	II
ABSTRACT	III
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	V
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	VII
LIST OF FIGURES.....	X
LIST OF TABLES	XI
LIST OF APPENDICES	XII
CHAPTER ONE	1
BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM	1
PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS	10
RESEARCH DESIGN.....	11
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	12
ASSUMPTIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND SCOPE (DELIMITATIONS).....	13
SUMMARY	14
CHAPTER TWO	16
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....	16
VULNERABILITY AND MARGINALIZED YOUTH.....	16
<i>Youth transitioning out of foster care</i>	19
RESILIENCE AND MARGINALIZED YOUTH	21
<i>Conceptualizations of resilience</i>	22
<i>Interventions that aim to foster resilience</i>	25
MINDFULNESS	27
<i>Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) with youth</i>	34
ARTS-BASED METHODS WITH YOUNG PEOPLE	39
SUMMARY	43
CHAPTER THREE.....	45
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	45
RESEARCH PARADIGM	45
EPISTEMOLOGY.....	47
THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE	48
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH	50
RESEARCH QUESTIONS	51
SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS.....	52
RESEARCHER REFLEXIVITY	55
LOCATION OF STUDY AND RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS	62
PARTICIPANTS.....	65
THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF AN ARTS-BASED MINDFULNESS GROUP FOR YOUTH TRANSITIONING OUT OF FOSTER CARE	69
<i>Strength-based approaches in group work</i>	70
<i>Resilience</i>	72
<i>Mindfulness as a holistic practice</i>	74
<i>Arts-based methods and experiential learning</i>	80
GROUP STRUCTURE AND PROCESS.....	82
DATA COLLECTION.....	89

DATA ANALYSIS	92
RIGOUR.....	98
SUMMARY	102
CHAPTER FOUR.....	104
RESILIENCE DURING THE AGING-OUT PROCESS:	104
THE COMPLEXITIES OF “BEING STRONG” AND SEEKING SUPPORT	104
THE CHALLENGES OF SYSTEM-INVOLVEMENT AND AGING-OUT	105
<i>Parentification</i>	107
<i>Effects of separation from biological family members</i>	110
<i>Impermanence of foster homes and living situations</i>	113
<i>Academic pressures</i>	115
<i>Experiences of marginalization</i>	118
DRAWING ON BOTH INNER STRENGTHS AND EXTERNAL SUPPORTS	120
<i>Going with the flow</i>	121
<i>Being strong</i>	122
<i>Utilizing support from others</i>	126
THE PROVISION OF SOCIAL SUPPORT THROUGH GROUP PARTICIPATION	133
<i>Inclusivity</i>	135
<i>Feeling safe</i>	137
<i>Having fun</i>	139
SUMMARY	143
CHAPTER FIVE	145
UNDERSTANDING MINDFULNESS AND ITS BENEFITS	145
UNDERSTANDING MINDFULNESS.....	146
<i>Thinking, attention, and awareness</i>	146
<i>Awareness of thoughts and feelings after the group</i>	150
<i>Sensory awareness</i>	152
<i>Non-judgemental acceptance</i>	156
THE BENEFITS OF LEARNING TO BE MINDFUL	160
<i>Emotion regulation</i>	163
<i>Optimism</i>	167
<i>Sleep hygiene</i>	172
SUMMARY OF GROUP DISCUSSION ABOUT THE GROUP PROGRAM.....	174
<i>The importance of practice</i>	176
<i>Collaboration</i>	180
<i>Promoting humour and enjoyment of activities</i>	181
SUMMARY	183
CHAPTER SIX	184
CONCLUSIONS	184
PURPOSE OF THE STUDY	186
HOW ARE ARTS-BASED MINDFULNESS INTERVENTIONS SUITABLE, FEASIBLE, AND BENEFICIAL (IF AT ALL) FOR YOUTH TRANSITIONING OUT OF FOSTER CARE?	187
HOW DID THE YOUTH UNDERSTAND RESILIENCE AND MINDFULNESS?	197
WHAT ARE THE YOUTHS’ EXPERIENCES OF PARTICIPATING IN AN ARTS-BASED MINDFULNESS PROGRAM?.....	198
WHAT WERE THE YOUTHS’ EXPERIENCES OF LEARNING MINDFULNESS?.....	198
WHAT CONNECTIONS CAN BE MADE BETWEEN LEARNING MINDFULNESS AND DEVELOPING RESILIENCE?	199
LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH.....	203

REFERENCES.....	212
APPENDICES.....	263

List of Figures

QUALITATIVE INQUIRY CONTINUUM (BUTLER-KISBER, 2010)	46
PARTICIPANTS' CHALLENGES, RESILIENCE AND THE GROUP EXPERIENCE.	104
UNDERSTANDING MINDFULNESS AND THE BENEFITS OF MINDFUL PRACTICE	146

List of Tables

TENSIONS OF RESILIENCE AS REPORTED BY UNGAR ET AL (2007)25

SCHEDULE OF DATA COLLECTION90

SUMMARY OF MOST ENJOYABLE, USEFUL, AND MEMORABLE ACTIVITIES175

List of Appendices

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....	263
FIRST INTERVIEW.....	263
SECOND INTERVIEW.....	264
THIRD INTERVIEW.....	265
APPENDIX B: ETHICAL APPROVAL	268
APPENDIX C: GOALS AND DESCRIPTIONS OF GROUP SESSIONS	269
SESSION ONE	269
SESSION TWO.....	275
SESSION THREE.....	278
SESSION FOUR.....	281
SESSION FIVE.....	286
SESSION SIX	290
SESSION SEVEN.....	292
SESSION EIGHT	295
SESSION NINE.....	297
SESSION TEN	300

Chapter One

As the field of research investigating mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) continues to expand, studies implementing MBIs with marginalized youth are noticeably absent. The study that is discussed in this thesis helps to address this lack of attention. I developed and explored the implementation of an innovative MBI with a small group of youth transitioning out of foster care due to their age. In general, these youth remain underrepresented in qualitative research processes, contributing to their public “invisibility” and negatively contributing to long term health and education outcomes.

This thesis is presented in five chapters. Herein I describe the background, purpose and the overarching methodology that frames the current study. In doing so, I provide an overview of several key concepts and discuss the objectives of the study. To conclude, I present the research questions, the study’s design, theoretical framework and scope. In Chapter Two, I provide a highly focused review of the relevant research literature, expanding on the overview of key terms from this introduction. Chapter Three consists of a detailed explanation of the study’s methodology. The findings of the study are presented and discussed in Chapter Four and Five. In the final chapter, Chapter Six, I summarize the central findings and examine their implications, and provide recommendations for future research.

Background of the Problem

Each year in British Columbia, the site of this research study, approximately 700 youth “age out” of the child welfare system (Vancouver Foundation, 2013). In Ontario, that number more than doubles at 1500 youth (Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, 2012). The disparity between youth transitioning out of foster care and their peers is striking. While many young adults regularly receive familial financial support into their twenties and thirties,

provincial legislation across many provinces sees most funding for housing and education supports for youth aging from the child welfare system discontinued at age 18-19 years (Vancouver Foundation, 2013). Moreover, while the public is growing increasingly aware that most young people are not able to successfully handle this transition independently, awareness that youth in the child welfare system are effectively cut off from financial support is limited, contributing to “the invisibility of youth in care” (Dewar & Goodman, 2014; Vancouver Foundation, 2013, p. 7).

This invisibility can be felt as a sense of isolation and powerlessness by children in care, further marginalizing their experiences (Office of the Provincial Advocate, 2015). Many blame youth for the situations they face as they age out of the system. In general, the public often fails to consider the broader social factors (e.g., experiences of poverty, poor housing, difficulty engaging in the education system, health challenges, and the lasting effects of having experienced trauma) that have contributed to these youths’ current plight and earlier circumstances resulting in child welfare involvement in the first place. Instead, public invisibility contributes to further marginalization, including increased stigma, social isolation, and a tendency for youth to self-blame and not seek support. Overall, when they age out, many youth will: attain lower levels of education than their peers, become homeless or struggle to avoid homelessness, and expect to incur poorer health outcomes across their lifespan (Ministry of Children and Youth Services & Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, 2013). Since responsibility for child welfare rests with society as a whole, research is necessary to support policies and programs that promote improved long term health and education outcomes, more equitable to the experience of peers not involved in the child welfare system.

Researchers studying the difficulties facing older youth transitioning out of foster care suggested that these youth may benefit from preventative, strength-based strategies to assist them to navigate the challenges they face as they enter adulthood (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Indeed, researchers have documented hard fought successes of those who have successfully exited the foster care system (Gonzalez, 2015; Wright, Maston, & Narayan, 2013). In my own work as a child and youth care (CYC) worker, I have been inspired by youth who defied the odds to achieve the gains in their lives, for example, maintaining an apartment on their own, or being awarded a scholarship to attend post-secondary studies. I also just plainly respected the difficulty of negotiating the additional challenges that these youth faced not having the same degree of familial support I had received in adolescence and adulthood.

CYC is a dynamic and holistic practice-based helping profession with multi-disciplinary roots (Charles & Garfat, 2009), committed to young people's vibrant growth and development. Indeed, as one leader in the field commented, CYC is the profession that "considers its clients holistically and works to attain all needed supports and services so that the total experience of clients in their life space or milieu is experienced as an integrated whole" (Freeman, 2013, p. 106). While the discipline continues to evolve, no one theory has had greater influence on the discipline as a whole than Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theoretical perspective on the ecology of human development (Ferguson, Pence, & Denholm, 1993a). Bronfenbrenner (1979) drew attention to "functional interdependence between living organisms and their surroundings" (p. xii) and though this view was not new at the time, his work increased the legitimacy of the idea that the various "ecologies" an individual interacts with are of incredible importance to the study of human development (Derksen, 2010).

An important value of CYC that coincides with an ecological understanding of child development is the focus on identifying existing strengths and assets within their environment, and ensuring that any/all actions are client-centered, meaning the individual is an active agent in any/all decision-making. This requires at all times a high degree of self-awareness and accountability on the part of the CYC practitioner (Stuart, 2013). Some of the values of my own CYC practice include inclusiveness and collaboration, and an emphasis on client-centered and strengths-based approaches with youth who live on the margins. A strengths-based perspective is embedded in the current study through the use of qualitative methods, a focus on establishing community-based partnerships, the development of group methods for youth transitioning out of foster care that meet youth “where they are” rather than applying methods from the “top down”, and the adoption of a complex multidimensional understanding of resilience.

Despite more than 40 years of resilience research (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, & Ouston, 1979; Rutter, 1987; Ungar, 2015; Werner & Smith, 1982), interest in the subject remains high based on the prevailing belief that people need resilience to appropriately cope with stress, and maintain well-being (Wong & Wong, 2012). Clear definitions of the term, however, remain elusive based on how researchers have conceptualized the term, for example, as a trait, state, or process. Moreover, researchers have acknowledged the role that their own values have in the study of resilience (e.g., for example, deciding what behaviours are considered maladaptive) (Masten, 2014). Increasingly, researchers have recognized that systemic, cultural, and social factors influence individual well-being and recovery from adverse circumstances (Ungar, Ghazinour, & Richter, 2013). Given the complexity of external factors (e.g., housing, health, and education) and policies involved with the child welfare system, and the removal of most personal autonomy and decision-making until

one is deemed an “adult”, this view holds particularly true for youth transitioning out of foster care.

Recently, Ungar (2015) proposed a systemic approach to diagnosing resilience that promotes a strengths-based perspective in clinical practice because it necessitates, in the face of adversity, that helping/health professionals look for the contextual and multidimensional protective processes in a child’s life, rather than only focusing on deficits. Consequently, as a child and youth worker rooted in strengths-based practice, this understanding of resilience provides an assuring “fit”. For the purposes of this study, resilience is considered as:

both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to health-sustaining resources, including opportunities to experience feelings of well-being, and a condition of the individual’s family, community and culture to provide these health resources and experiences in culturally meaningful ways. (Ungar, 2008, p. 225)

Excitedly, mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) represent a promising practice that may foster resilience among young people (Tan, 2015). Mindfulness refers to a holistic philosophy and practice emanating from the Buddhist tradition of meditation as one teaching for the purposes of increasing compassion, reducing suffering, and helping individuals attain inner peace (Coholic, 2013; McWilliams, 2014). Kabat-Zinn (1994) was one of the first Western practitioners to define mindfulness for use in North America. He defined mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (p. 4). Consequently, his definition is often used as the foundation for researchers working in this field. General agreement on what specifically constitutes an MBI is a matter of ongoing discussion largely dependent on the theories that underpin different methods of facilitation (Cullen, 2011; Shonin, Van Gordon, & Griffiths, 2013). In general, MBIs share the principles of mindfulness to

generate insight and encourage a healthy mental state (Cullen, 2011). Recently, MBIs have been conceptualized in the research literature as either “first” or “second” generation (Van Gordon, Shonin, Griffiths, & Singh, 2015). First generation MBIs refer to interventions such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction or Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, designed by Kabat-Zinn (2003), and Segal, Williams and Teasdale (2002), respectively. The rapid integration of first generation MBIs has led some to question their authenticity, regardless of the growing evidence base. Accordingly, second generation research conceptualizes the development of MBIs that can be applied secularly but remain overtly open about mindfulness’ spiritual roots.

From 2006-2012, I was part of a research team that studied the suitability, feasibility, and benefits of arts-based and experiential methods (including mindfulness) for the improvement of self-awareness, self-esteem and resilience in children with high needs. Although the first and second generation language had not been articulated at that time, the research I was involved with could be considered a second generation MBI based on our arts-based and holistic approach. This research occurred with latency aged children living in foster care, and/or facing mental health challenges. I was initially drawn to this research based on my earlier experiences as a CYC worker and camp counselor, facilitating wilderness canoe trips with marginalized youth in the summer while working in various residential, educational, and correctional settings the remainder of the year.

The use of the term “arts-based” denotes an umbrella term encompassing the wide-ranging application of visual, musical, and narrative techniques in practice and research (Coholic, Loughheed, & Cadell, 2009). In my doctoral research, “art” included drawing, painting, clay, poetry, and collage. The use of the term “holistic” refers to the physical, mental/cognitive, emotional, and spiritual aspects of a person’s experience in their life. This may be because a

person, through the experience of art, feels more emotionally and/or spiritually connected, facilitating increased self-expression, and contributing to an elevated feeling of personal well-being and connectedness with others. Arts-based methods continue to receive increasing attention in CYC practice given the inherent flexibility, purposefulness, and compatibility within a holistic approach (Paget, 2014; van den Akker, 2014). Further support of these methods with youth transitioning out of foster care are provided by Nsonwu, Dennison, and Long (2015) based on the rationale of providing a safe group environment where these youth can feel more connected to one another and express themselves comfortably.

Similarly, the research groups that I helped to develop and facilitate (2006-2012) were unique in their use of an arts-based experiential approach to teaching mindfulness and in their focus on vulnerable children. The work was very rewarding. It struck me as ironic that the “academic” methods and activities were rooted in the skills of creatively engaging young people in the non-clinical settings where I had worked as a CYC worker. I appreciated the rarity of witnessing young people, often from marginalized backgrounds, participating in a research group at a university. I enjoyed engaging vulnerable youth in activities representing meaningful research within an actual “ivory tower.” Anecdotally, I enjoyed hearing them talk about one day pursuing academic goals as they walked to and from the group room, which was formerly a science-lab renovated for the purposes of facilitating group work. I was further motivated by the results that emerged. The findings helped us indicate that the children learned new skills such as mindfulness, which helped them to develop and improve their coping abilities, increase their awareness of their feelings, and promote positive feelings and thoughts about themselves (Coholic, Loughheed, & Lebreton, 2009; Coholic, Loughheed, & Cadell, 2009). Additionally, these researchers pointed to commonalities between the benefits of learning mindfulness and the

processes that can contribute to resilience, suggesting potential connections between learning mindfulness and developing resilience. These findings and the application of creative methods with these youth further motivated me to pursue my doctorate as a way to explore additional research directions with older youth in care, a population of youth I was familiar with based on my CYC background.

To date, there has been scant research exploring the implementation of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) with older youth involved in the child welfare system. There may be several reasons for this including the logistical challenges involved with facilitating research among vulnerable youth populations including getting the youth to the group on a consistent basis. Other challenges included the reality that older youth in care are less likely to engage in helping services, that few interventions are designed for this population, and that those interventions that exist are not always available or accessible. I thought that youth aging out of the child welfare system could also stand to benefit from arts-based mindfulness group work since their long term health and education outcomes are generally poor. Based on the emerging nature of arts-based mindfulness methods, we did not know whether these methods could contribute to processes of resilience for youth transitioning out of foster care. In the current study, arts-based methods were utilized as a way to help provide a meaningful experience with mindfulness for participants that may be reluctant to engage in a helping process (Nsonwu, Dennison, & Long, 2015). These methods seemed like a “match” since these young adults typically face challenges that create difficulties such as sitting still, paying attention, and focusing for more than a few moments, and the arts-based activities could prove engaging for these hard to reach youth.

The MBI that I developed for this study was different than manualized mindfulness programs (Metz et al., 2013) based on the use of the arts-based activities that aim to help the participants learn skills related to mindfulness such as observing one's thoughts and feelings in a way that does not require the youth to initially sit still and pay attention to their breath for longer periods of time. The MBI in the current study could also be considered second generation since I adopted holistic, art-based methods as a way to creatively teach mindfulness to a group of young people unlikely to engage in mindfulness by way of a first generation MBI. As Paget (2014) aptly described, using "artistic interventions and activities invite meaning; they do not impose it" (p. 57).

In summary, in the current study, I aimed to address the lack of research examining the benefits of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) for youth transitioning out of foster care, the lack of research exploring these youths' perspectives on resilience, and the need to assist youth involved in the child welfare system to improve their health and education outcomes. In this study, the participants were taught mindfulness-based methods via arts-based techniques in a group work process with the aim of fostering the development of resilience because, for some youth, a holistic and creative approach may be more welcomed, needed, suitable, relevant, beneficial, and meaningful. Although interest in mindfulness and how it can help youth has emerged, research that explores the connections (if any) between learning mindfulness and developing resilience is still relatively new. For instance, Gueldner and Feuerborn (2015) recently articulated that for a general youth population 'mindfulness-based practices' (akin to MBIs) represent credible options to pursue the objectives of a social and emotional learning (SEL) framework to foster resilience in schools. Perhaps, as a result of logistical challenges outlined earlier, researchers' successful efforts to undertake this type of research among youth

involved in the child welfare system remains scarce. Within my study, I also sought to address the call for more holistic approaches to working with youth (Crenshaw, 2006; Rogers, 1999; Scales, Syvertsen, Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Sesma, Jr., 2014; Wong & Wong, 2012). Overall, there is a dearth of evidence related to the helpfulness of alternative, more holistic approaches to working with youth transitioning out of foster care, as well as how these approaches are perceived by the youth themselves. By addressing these gaps in our understanding through the proposed research, I aimed to make a valuable and timely contribution.

Purpose and Research Questions

The aim and purpose of this study is to generate new understanding and knowledge about the use of MBIs among youth transitioning out of foster care. I explored what participants understood about the concept of mindfulness prior to participation in this research process, and how this changed with their involvement in the group sessions. Likewise, I examined how they understood the concept of doing well amidst adversity in order to assess whether the MBI developed for this study would foster improved resilience. I interviewed youth transitioning out of foster care using semi-structured interviews to gather information about the usefulness/benefits, suitability, and feasibility of an arts-based MBI from the perspectives of the youth themselves. In addition, from a practice standpoint, I hoped to provide some practical guidance to the supportive adults involved with youth in the child welfare system about how to implement a meaningful, engaging group for underserved youth. In support of these aims, and based on the empirical and clinical gaps discussed above, my research questions (including one central question and four supporting questions) sought to explore:

- How are arts-based mindfulness interventions suitable, feasible, and beneficial (if at all) for youth transitioning out of foster care?

- How do these youth understand mindfulness and resilience?
- What are the youths' experiences of participating in an arts-based mindfulness program?
- What were the youths' experiences of learning mindfulness?
- What connections can be made between learning mindfulness and developing resilience?

Research Design

Using qualitative research methods facilitates opportunities for researchers to pursue an in-depth exploration of phenomena (Morse & Field, 1995; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) by focusing intensely on situations and experiences of people, often using the views of participants in order to explain and describe an experience (Maxwell, 1997). Increasingly, researchers have begun to employ qualitative studies to better understand youths' transition out of foster care (Miller & Collins-Camargo, 2015; Munson, Smalling, Spencer, Scott & Tracey, 2010; Parry & Weatherhead, 2014; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Furthermore, some researchers have incorporated arts-based methods among older youth in care to improve engagement with support services and social support among peers with similar experiences (Nsonwu, Dennison, & Long, 2015). In order to move closer to successfully conceptualizing support services for these youth, more research is required to find out, from their perspective, what considerations about the use of mindfulness and arts-based methods may improve their transition from the child welfare system, and their overall resilience. Semi-structured interviews involving a set of questions created to explore my research questions were facilitated with eight participants: before, immediately following, and four months after the end of the group sessions. A follow-up group discussion occurred a year after the final individual interviews to update participants on the research process and seek their feedback regarding the usefulness of the activities that were embedded in the group process.

Theoretical Framework

In the current study, constructivism provided the main epistemological thrust because the experiential and exploratory nature of the questions being asked necessitated an inductive method that builds understanding from the bottom-up: from the experiences of the participants themselves. From a constructivist perspective, understandings of truth, or what we come to refer to as true, are constructed through our engagement with the world and this engagement can differ from person to person depending on social location (Houston, 2001). Constructivism weighs heavily the role our collective culture has on the creation and communication of knowledge (Crotty, 1998).

The theoretical perspective aligns with the inherent epistemological standpoint of the study, and describes the underpinnings for the research methodology. In doing so, the theoretical perspective helped to ground the assumptions that were embedded in the study's approach. As Crotty (1998) pointed out, "different ways of viewing the world shape different ways of researching the world" (p. 66). When researchers elaborate a theoretical perspective, they provide the basis for understanding the assumptions reflected in the methodology. In the current study, the theoretical perspective was based on the values of CYC described earlier.

Additionally, the format and structure of the activities in the research groups borrowed heavily from a traditional experiential learning model (Kolb, 1984), which was strongly influenced by John Dewey's theory of experience. Dewey's ideas about experience can be described as a river that changes in shape, characterized by never-ending interplay between our thoughts and our individual, shared, and physical environment (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Dewey's ideas about experience resonated with me, personally and professionally, given my past experience working with youth in outdoor education and therapeutic recreation. Furthermore, for

Dewey, art was connected to daily life as a method for exploring and making-meaning. This was based on the idea that the process of experiencing art could produce new understandings from past and present experience, resulting in an imaginative and cultivated experience (Butler-Kisber, Li, Clandinin, & Markus, 2007).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope (Delimitations)

In this study, my primary assumption was that participants were representative of a group who remain largely “invisible” to the public, and underrepresented in the research literature. It was equally assumed that these participants were the most “qualified” to speak with in order to seek answers to the research questions. As such, I hoped that participants would feel comfortable enough to share their honest perspectives based on a range of personal experiences including child welfare system involvement, and participation in the research process. I also assumed that the use of arts-based methods with youth transitioning out of foster care may help them more comfortably express themselves, and stay engaged in the helping process while they learned and practiced mindfulness. This was important because this population of young people, during such an important juncture, are often less likely to access/receive helping services. The main limitation of the study is the small number of participants, which was influenced by the logistical considerations of facilitating research groups with youth in care. First, group ratios of participants to facilitators and overall group size remained low based on the past success of earlier research groups. Small ratios and overall size allows facilitators to attend to the unique needs of group members and honour the strengths each person brings to the group (Coholic, Oystreck, Posteraro, & Loughheed, in press). Second, the geographic context for the current study was the rural Sunshine Coast region of the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD). The communities in the “lower” Sunshine Coast were accessible by car but multiple

ferries are required to access other communities in the northern part of the region. Consequently, I focused on the lower Sunshine Coast so participants in the groups could feasibly travel, with the assistance of MCFD staff and foster parents, to a central location. In a way, this underlines the challenges faced by policy makers and service providers of providing responsive programs to rural youths, and how some youth, solely based on where they live, can face further marginalization with system involvement. For example, if a child is placed in a foster home outside of their community in order to gain access to more MCFD services and/or because that is where a suitable foster home exists, they may also experience a greater sense of social isolation and stigma living in an unfamiliar place.

A small number of male participants specifically underlined the challenge of engaging male youth in care in research and I will say more about this in the final chapter. Unfortunately, because of this, an opportunity to better understand the impact of this research program among an older group of male youth in care was hampered. However, despite the challenges of recruiting male youth and the broader challenges associated with undertaking research in rural areas, I am proud of focusing research efforts on a region where fewer opportunities were available for these youth compared to their peers living in urban areas.

Summary

This concludes the introduction of the current study, which traced the development of the research process. I described the situation facing youth as they age out of the child welfare system, with a specific emphasis on the concept of resilience and its relevance to this population of youth. In doing so, I explained my background as a child and youth care worker, including prior research experience with arts-based mindfulness methods and their rationale for continued development and implementation with youth aging out of the system. I outlined the current

empirical and practice-based gaps, and provided the research questions. Finally, I briefly described the research design, theoretical framework, limitations, and scope of the study. The next chapter expands on the concepts I have introduced here by providing a thorough review of the literature in these key areas.

Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

In this chapter, three areas of research are considered. First, in this review, I focus on the experiences and challenges faced by youth involved with the child welfare system, and youth leaving the system due to their age. Second, given its importance to overcoming serious life challenges, I examine the concept of resilience and how it has been studied and applied to various populations including children and youth in care. Suggesting that the view of resilience in the past has been especially narrow, an argument is presented for adopting a more holistic understanding that may more accurately reflect the views of youth transitioning out of foster care, and ultimately lead to more meaningful interventions. Third, in this review, I describe mindfulness and mindfulness-based interventions with youth. Current gaps in our knowledge include how mindfulness-based interventions work with vulnerable youth, and how resilience is understood from the perspectives of the youth themselves. Based on existing research, the connections between mindfulness and resilience are considered.

Vulnerability and Marginalized Youth

Vulnerability, measured through behaviour, cognition and emotional health, affects children across all socio-economic backgrounds (Leitch, 2008). The youth who engaged in my doctoral study can be described as “vulnerable” or “at risk” because they have experienced significant trauma and/or loss, and were involved with the child welfare system. “Trauma” refers to a range of experiences that have some lasting impact on a person (Paton, Crouch, & Camic, 2009). Children in care experience trauma because of direct abuse, neglect, and/or violence (Cohen, Mannarino, & Deblinger, 2006) including the exposure as a witness to similarly occurring events (Lev-Wiesel & Liraz, 2007). They also experience interruption of relationships

with their families, further transitions, and instability following the removal from one's parents (Bruskas, 2008; Heath & Priest, 2015). Readers may be misled by the term "vulnerability" if they are singularly focused on locating problems at an individual level since the term has suffered at times from what Theys (as cited in Delor & Hubert, 2000) referred to as "semantic overflow", implying a personal helplessness or fragility (p. 1558). It is important to keep in mind that the experience of becoming involved with the child welfare system itself can lead to, or exacerbate, social inequalities of marginalization (Bay-Cheng & Fava, 2014). Lynam and Cowley (2007) suggested that marginalization is "characterized by a sense of being overlooked, categorized or misrepresented. It curtails opportunities for capacity building and constrains ways in which relationships are established" (p. 146). Youth involved in the child welfare system routinely face an unequal distribution of such experiences such as facing increased stigma and discrimination, achieving lower levels of education, having less access to financial and emotional support from biological family members, and becoming disproportionately represented in the mental health system and correctional systems. Thus, using the term "marginalized" can widen the lens that readers use to evaluate the social processes that can make matters worse for young people involved in the child welfare system.

In general, youth who have experienced trauma and/or loss often have difficulties sitting still, paying attention, regulating their emotions, and coping effectively with feelings, problems, and challenges (Boyd Webb, 2006a; Crenshaw, 2008). Furthermore, these children's individual experience of trauma can impact the expectations they have for themselves in the future (Kerig, Bennet, Thompson, & Becker, 2012). Researchers have highlighted the negative impact of trauma for children in care on mental health, educational, and long-term functional outcomes (Bruskas, 2008; Farris-Manning, & Zandstra, 2003; Racusin, Maelender, Sengupta, Isquith, &

Straus, 2005), and agreed that children in care display characteristics of having experienced loss and/or trauma such as expecting abusive and negative experiences to continue, experiencing poor psychosocial functioning, poor self-esteem, and self-blame (Boyd Webb, 2006a; Coholic, Lebreton, & Loughheed, 2009). Friedrich (2002) pointed to broad categorizations of the negative impact of trauma including difficulties with attachment, self-regulation, and a developing sense of sense, though it is important to remember that the experience of trauma will not necessarily affect every youth in a predictable manner. Factors such as the duration of the experience and type of trauma endured may exacerbate or amend the individual's effects (McCrory, De Brito, & Viding, 2010). Furthermore, researchers have suggested that it is important to consider how traumatic stress impacts the developing brain of adolescents, potentially overwhelming their ability to cope (Carrion, Weems, & Reiss, 2007; De Bellis & Zisk, 2014).

On the other hand, researchers have also pointed out the tendency for neurobiological adaptation in the brain in the context of trauma (Mead, Beauchaine, & Shannon, 2010). Despite the challenges that children in care face, researchers have demonstrated that children in long-term foster care, for example, have shown positive outcomes in social relationships and prosocial behaviours (Gonzalez, 2015; Fernandez, 2009). Moreover, children experiencing chronic maltreatment can develop along healthy trajectories without repeating violent patterns or incurring disproportionate rates of mental illness (Masten & Wright, 2010). So while children in care have unique needs that are different from their peers, the potential is there for them to lead healthy productive lives if they are provided with supports that complement their strengths and develop their future capacities (Flynn, Dudding, & Barber, 2006; Kaplan, Skolnik, & Turnbull, 2009). Thus, interest in developing resilience, particularly among young people who have endured difficult experiences, remains high.

Youth transitioning out of foster care. In general, adolescence itself represents a social construct, the meaning of which has changed over time to reflect particular contexts (Comacchio, 2006). A salient understanding within the research on adolescence in North America is that it represents a period of time beset with challenges for all teens due to the multifarious interaction of changes that occur at this time including development in the brain, body, in relationships, and social roles (Griffin, 2013). The social and emotional challenges typically associated with adolescence include risk-taking, the development of emotional well-being and healthy friendships, and conflict resolution. Arnett (2004) has further described a distinct period of transition between adolescence and adulthood called emerging adulthood during which many youth experience feelings of transition, instability, identity exploration, self-focus, and optimism. For youth transitioning out of foster care, this period of time also means “aging out” of the child welfare system, which includes the elimination of housing, financial, and health care supports at the age of majority (e.g., age 18 or 19 years) (Atkinson, 2008). Drapeau, Saint-Jacques, Lépine, Bégin, and Bernard (2007) suggested that helping practitioners more thoroughly consider the challenges teenagers in foster care face due to their heightened state of vulnerability as they transition out of foster care. As these authors reported, teens living in foster care have a higher prevalence for lower education levels, underemployment, mental health issues, sparse support from family members, and risk for homelessness, drug abuse, and early parenthood. Similarly, youth transitioning out of foster care have been identified as particularly at-risk of experiencing problems such as underemployment, poverty, early pregnancy, and involvement with the legal system (Arnett, 2004; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006; Samuels & Pryce, 2008; Shirk, & Stangler, 2004). Many youth aging out of the child welfare system are unprepared for the sudden transition and lack familial support systems to help them negotiate the challenges facing them.

Accordingly, these youth often struggle to live independently (Geenen & Powers, 2007). In summary, youth transitioning out of foster care face the same normative pressures at this time in their lives as other young people but without the same supports as their peers, and they have carried an extra burden related to their system-involvement (Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010).

As a country, we are beginning to quantify the economic costs of inaction towards mental health (Lim, Jacobs, Ohinmaa, Schopflocher, & Dewa, 2008; Waddell, Shepherd, Chen, & Boyle, 2013). The scarcity of well-timed and suitable supports for young people can lead to further decompensating of prevailing mental health symptoms yet early intervention can reduce further occurrence in later adulthood (Stuart et al., 2014). Yet, in reaction to the overwhelming challenges facing youth transitioning from foster care, it is important to keep in mind that vulnerability remains an impermanent state (Leitch, 2008), suggesting that targeted policies and programs can reduce vulnerability (Ungar, 2013). Thus, some researchers have focused on the importance of developing and implementing strategies to develop resilience in youth aging out of care, and the broader population of young people making the transition to adulthood. These researchers have supported calls for interventions to reduce the disparities in health for children and youth in care and to support the positive development of resilience (Leve et al., 2012; Klika & Herrenkohl, 2013). Yet, despite a general understanding of the challenges facing this population of youth in care, only recently have researchers begun to explore these challenges and potential solutions from the perspectives of youth themselves (Curry & Abrams, 2015; Cunningham & Diversi, 2013; Hiles, Moss, Wright, & Dallos, 2013; Quest, Fullerton, Geenen, & Powers, 2012). These researchers have argued that solutions require listening to youth perspectives, since ill-advised efforts to support youth transitioning out of foster care can render negative consequences such as social exclusion and further marginalization (Axford, 2008).

Resilience and Marginalized Youth

Researchers from a variety of disciplines have paid significant attention to resilience over the past 40 years. Since the 1970s, the path of resilience research with vulnerable youth has evolved from an early examination of individual factors related to positive adaptation, to an understanding of a complex interaction between individuals and their surrounding ecologies dependent on individual as well as familial, social, and political influences (Liebenberg, Ungar & Ikeda, 2015; Masten, 2014; Rutter, 1987). Over the course of this research, the primary area for debate has concerned the definition of resilience, which differed depending on whether the term had been understood as a personality trait unique to some children, positive outcomes in the face of adversity, or as a process of normal human adaptation characterized by risk versus protective individual, family, and environmental factors (Ahern, Kiehl, Sole, & Byers, 2006) though there is broad agreement that resilience involves adaptation in the context of adversity (Ungar, 2015). When I began this research process, resilience as a concept was ubiquitous within the helping/health professions. Some researchers had cautioned against the overuse and exploitation (through oppression and globalization) of the term “resilience” (e.g., companies standing resilient against workers) because this overuse threatens to render more purposeful meanings, such as those which support people as aspiring to improve their own health, as potentially useless (Ungar, 2005). Moreover, one of the criticisms of early resilience research was the tendency of researchers to contextualize risk factors and positive outcomes according to Western-based, minority world definitions of health (Ungar, 2008). As a result of focusing only on individual and relational factors related to resilience, early resilience researchers lacked a view of resilience that contained factors embedded in community and culture that could adequately represent the diversity of salient factors from group to group (Rogoff, 2003). As Ungar (2008) explained at the

time, “We do not yet know what resilience means to non-Western populations and marginalized groups such as Aboriginal people who live side-by-side with their mainstream neighbours in Western settings” (p. 219). This idea that we have yet to really understand what resilience means to non-Western populations or groups that live on the margins in Western countries resonated with the objectives of the current study because little was known about resilience from the perspectives of youth transitioning out of foster care.

Conceptualizations of resilience. The study of resilience remains an important endeavour with more recent understandings reflecting a broader social ecology (Ungar, in press). One of the key voices in the evolution of this research is Dr. Michael Ungar who has played a leading role in the study of resilience worldwide through the development of The Resilience Research Centre at Dalhousie University (www.resilienceproject.org). As Ungar (2005) explained, decades of research describing health as an individual problem may have blinded some researchers to evidence that resilience is not just a characteristic of individuals. Rather, it can be conceptualized as a complex social construct that describes

both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to health-sustaining resources, including opportunities to experience feelings of well-being, and a condition of the individual’s family, community and culture to provide these health resources and experiences in culturally meaningful ways. (Ungar, 2008, p. 225)

A systemic conceptualization of resilience recognizes a dynamic relationship between youth, the resources they may have access to, and their culture and/or context (Chandler & Lalonde, 2008; Ungar, 2015). One important consideration to note is how Ungar (2008, 2011) differentiated resilience from other forms of positive well-being in that the study of resilience occurs in the context of “significant adversity” (p. 225), differentiating resilience from optimal functioning in

environments devoid of trauma. Furthermore, in the context of adversity, an individual's environment is more responsible for resilience compared to individual factors (Ungar, in press). These distinctions make the study of resilience appropriate with youth transitioning out of foster care given the experiences they have endured.

Researchers have emphasized “harnessing biological, psychosocial, structural and cultural resources to sustain well-being” in the development of interventions that will promote resilience among young people (Panter-Brick & Leckman, 2013, p. 333). Similarly, Ungar (2013) pointed to four distinct “sources” of resilience that are relevant to children exposed to maltreatment including (1) individual characteristics such as temperament and coping skills, (2) the social determinants of health that influence the social capital available to youth, (3) interventions delivered by government or non-government organizations through social services, health and education systems, and (4) government policies that shape the over-arching structures that children live within. These sources emphasize the broader social landscape that impact a young person in care's ability to “do well” in the face of adversity.

Importantly, a small number of researchers have also studied the perspectives of youth and how they understand resilience. For example, an in-depth thematic content analysis of the viewpoints of 12 children in care, based on individual interviews, identified four processes of resilience: (1) increased perceived self-efficacy, (2) distancing oneself from risks, (3) discovering new opportunities, and (4) experiencing positive changes in personal, familial, academic and social areas of a one's life (Drapeau et al., 2007). These views were similar to a concept analysis reported by Earvolino-Ramirez (2007) in how youth discussed the value of participating in new opportunities, learning how to cope differently, and sharing new beliefs in themselves. Along these lines, Ungar et al. (2007) identified key “tensions” (p. 295) including

access to material resources, relationships, identity, power and control, cultural adherence, social justice, and cohesion (see Table 1 below). These researchers labelled the terms “tensions” to denote how complex it is for the individual to balance the often competing nature of pursuing multiple resources simultaneously (e.g., social connection through peer acceptance versus meeting expectations of authority figures providing access to education/health services), and suggested that programs promoting culturally meaningful ways of expressing youths’ control, identity, and relationship-building are more likely to assist youth in finding adequate health resources. When youth are assisted to develop skills and provided resources in these areas, they can improve their resilience.

Understanding how youth conceptualize resilience is important in the design of suitable approaches seeking to help youth with the challenges they face. In my own experiences as a group facilitator with youth, I frequently observed children experiencing these tensions, which encouraged me to consider them as central components of resilience in my doctoral research. Conceptualizing resilience from a wider perspective that included systemic influences and relationships honours the nuances that vulnerable youth may use to define and describe the concept in ways perhaps not previously represented in the literature (Kolar, 2011). Moreover, adopting a social ecological viewpoint emphasizes the dynamic interaction between participants and their broader social landscape, including the effect of well-designed interventions to potentiate resilience (Theron, Liebenberg, & Malindi, 2013; Ungar, 2011).

Table 1.*Tensions of Resilience as Reported by Ungar et al (2007)*

Tensions	Explanations
Access to material resources	Availability of financial, educational, medical, and employment assistance/opportunities; access to food, clothing and shelter
Relationships	Positive and effective relationships with significant others, peers and adults within one's family and community
Identity	Personal and collective sense of purpose, self-appraisal of strengths and weaknesses, aspirations, beliefs and values, including spiritual and religious identification
Power and control	Experiences of caring for one's self and others; the ability to affect change in social and physical environment in order to access health resources
Cultural adherence	Adherence to local and/or global cultural practices, values and beliefs
Social justice	Experiences related to finding a meaningful role in community and social equality
Cohesion	Balancing personal interests with a sense of responsibility to the greater good; feeling a part of something larger than one's self socially and spiritually

Interventions that aim to foster resilience. Samuels and Pryce (2008) conducted an interpretive study with young adults aging from care and pointed to the need to utilize more holistic frameworks that would foster accurate understanding of the needs of youth in foster care, rather than accepting the more traditional measurable and observed aspects of independence such as living independently and academic success. The authors rightly suggested that youth in foster care may not experience, or may experience differently, the events, skill-building, and nurturing that others would argue is essential to healthy adulthood. This underlines the importance of exploring with youth their ideas of what fosters and inhibits wellness, and reminds us not to

accept dominant cultural values applied to all youth, such as an overemphasis on the repudiation of dependence on others (Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

Conversely, promoting interdependence relies on the shared responsibility between youth, peers, families, and the broader community to compensate for any deficits youth may be experiencing in forming supportive relationships (Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006).

Interdependence is a concept that acknowledges the importance of mutual dependence on others, and rightfully acknowledges the specific challenges that youth involved with the child welfare system may be experiencing in part caused by the disruption of key relationships responsible for forming secure attachments. Advocates of interdependence argued that youth be empowered in the process of decision-making at each step along the way in their development in determining their own needs and interventions (Antle, Johnson, Barbee, & Sullivan, 2009; Propp et al., 2003).

In general, a review of resilience research with vulnerable youth shows there is a great need to develop sustainable, collaborative, long-term, community-based helping approaches that target multiple health issues and outcomes, and look specifically at the helpfulness of service provision (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Masten, 2014; Robards, 2009; Ungar, Liebenberg, & Ikeda, 2014; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Additionally, the use of the word “holistic” to describe frameworks that encapsulate an authentic picture of wellness, including physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, and cultural considerations are receiving attention as important viewpoints to understand how best to support youth into adulthood (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Panter-Brick & Leckman, 2013). For example, Cross and Purvis (2013) advocated for the combining of intervention modalities such as sensory processing, physical activity attachment, equine and canine therapy, and arts-based methods. These scholars pointed to growing agreement amongst other researchers (Diamond, 2010; Perry, 2006) that only a holistic and integrated approach can heal the damage

inflicted by trauma for children and youth in care. This viewpoint reflects a maturation of resilience research. Instead of accepting earlier conceptualizations of resilience and the targeted impact of more narrowly focused interventions, it may be more helpful to consider a process of wider interaction with the environment, and approaches that embrace this complexity during a crucial period of time for youth transitioning out of foster care. Mindfulness, which is discussed next, is one holistic intervention that has gained increasing interest and attention from both researchers and helping/health practitioners particularly over the past 10 years.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness refers to a holistic philosophy and practice emanating from the Buddhist tradition of meditation as one teaching for the purposes of increasing compassion, reducing suffering, and helping individuals attain inner peace (Gause & Coholic, 2010; McWilliams, 2014). Kabat-Zinn (1994) was one of the first Western practitioners to define mindfulness for use in North America. He defined mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (p. 4). Consequently, his definition is often used as the foundation for researchers working in this field. Recently, Saltzman (2014) offered a definition intended for use among young people that emphasized paying attention with kindness and with curiosity to choose our behaviours, and promoting autonomy and choice in terms of responding rather than reacting.

According to Grossman (2008), mindfulness practice connected this process of moment-to-moment awareness with feelings of kindness, knowledge creation, and ethical decision-making. Speaking to a deep connection with the concept, Kabat-Zinn (1990) described how mindfulness encompasses who we are, and how we view ourselves in the world, and learning to appreciate all of life’s moments. Though rooted in Buddhism, Siegel (2010) pointed out that the

cultivation of moment-to-moment, non-judgmental awareness was practiced in both Eastern and Western spiritual traditions, helping to confirm Kabat-Zinn's (2003) avowal that mindful practices are useful to a wide breadth of people representing varied spiritual backgrounds or none at all. Said another way, "Buddhism has pointed to, rather than invented, a human capacity" (Brown, Ryan, Loverich, Biegel & West, 2011, p. 1042). Both the complexity of mindfulness and the enormity of its scope cannot be understated. Mindfulness has been described as "the miracle which can call back in a flash our dispersed mind and restore it to wholeness so that we can live each minute of life" (Hanh, 1975, p. 14).

We are currently witnessing burgeoning interest in mindfulness across helping/health professions and within the general public. In fact, the present day intersection of science and Buddhism has been described as "unparalleled" (Mingyur, Swanson, & Goleman, 2008, p. vii). Indeed, saying that interest and research examining the effectiveness of mindfulness has greatly increased in recent years is somewhat underemphasizing the field's explosiveness (Charters, 2013; Didonna, 2009). Since the 1990s, the contemporary and increasingly popular understanding of mindfulness has been well-integrated along mainstream medicine, neuroscience, psychology, social work, business and other disciplines (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Mindfulness is taught in medical curriculum at 16 schools in North America (Hutchinson & Dobkin, 2009) and the number of published scholarly articles has risen exponentially (Grossman & Van Dam, 2011). The convergence of deeply intimate consciousness with great personal healing potential is striking a loud human chord of interest and exploration (Black, 2014).

From its first use in the contemporary research lexicon, mindfulness has been operationalized according to the efforts by researchers to demarcate the mediators and

mechanisms at the root of its experience, and by the influence of the various behaviourist platforms used to operationalize its practice. Mindfulness can be viewed (like resilience) as a state, set of practices and/or trait (Garland, 2013). For example, Brown and Ryan (2003) referred to “a receptive attention and awareness of present events and experiences” (p. 823) whereas Goldstein (2002) emphasized a “quality of mind that notices what is present without judgement, without interference” (p. 89). Researchers have described several overlapping elements central to learning about mindfulness philosophy (Chiesa, 2013). For example, “openness” is often discussed in relation to paying attention as Kabat-Zinn (1994) stated “in a particular way: on purpose” (p. 4). An element of “curiosity” or playfulness is also considered important to carefully examining our moment-by-moment experiences for what may be hidden, disguised or otherwise ignored in the day to day complacency of mindlessness (Chiesa, Anselmi, & Serretti, 2014).

One way of teaching about curiosity is to encourage someone to consider they were experiencing whatever it is they are doing for the first time, with a ‘beginner’s mind’, as a young child would (Suzuki, 2010). A “non-judgmental” stance towards that which one is observing also complements most descriptions. So too does “acceptance” which is often referred to as accompanying or following on the heels of non-judgement, defined as “the fully open experience of what is, entering into reality just as it is, at this moment” (Robins, Schmidt III, & Linehan, 2004, p. 39). Acceptance differs from agreeing with uncomfortable or even detrimental past events, and focuses on acknowledging that those events have occurred and choosing to observe the effect of their recollection before resuming focus on moment-to-moment unfolding, again in a non-judgmental way (Dimidjian & Linehan, 2003). Finally, few (if any) definitions ignore “awareness”, described as arising when the preceding factors have been carefully cultivated,

reflecting that about ourselves which we already know but in a way we have not seen before; experiencing now in this moment in a new unencumbered way (Sauer et al., 2013). Still, despite researchers' best efforts to define and measure mindfulness according to these components, words seem inadequate in conveying the breadth and depth of a mindful experience. Yet, framing mindfulness as a process (for me anyway) is helpful in recognizing the interdependence of its parts, and in practice, reaffirms the importance of letting go of expectations of the destination to focus more fully on the journey/process of learning mindfulness.

Traditionally, mindfulness in North America has been used in the fields of psychology and medicine by way of a cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) approach. Examples of this are the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program, and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). Jon Kabat-Zinn was one of the first practitioners to introduce mindfulness research and practice into the North America context in the late 1970s and became well known for his development of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program (MBSR), which initially targeted patients with chronic pain but later expanded to other client populations (Kabat-Zinn, Lipworth, Burnery, & Sellers, 1986). Kabat-Zinn and other well-known contemporaries Segal, Williams, and Teasdale (founders of MBCT) had been strongly influenced by Buddhist meditation in the 1960s and in particular by the spiritual leadership of Goldstream, Kornfield, and Salzberg (Gilpin, 2008). Mindfulness in CBT format may include a prescribed yoga routine, guided meditation, mindful sitting, eating, and walking exercises, which are often delivered in an 8 to 12-week group format. Likewise, MBSR is delivered in an 8-week group format including similar activities and emphasizing non-judgmental awareness and acceptance of the body, and a focus through meditation on breathing (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). To this end, the application of mindfulness has

proven effective for a wide variety of adult client groups and problems including treatment for chronic pain, disordered eating, prevention of depression relapse, and the treatment of Type 2 diabetes (Baer, 2006; Dreger, MacKenzie, & McLeod, 2013; Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Kristeller & Hallett, 1999; Meeten, Whiting, & Williams, 2014).

Because mindfulness is an experiential construct, a debate exists between those seeking to operationalize and measure mindfulness, and others who insist the mainstreaming of mindfulness reduces the construct from its original intent and form. Approximate dividing lines in this debate can be drawn between those practicing mindfulness from a traditional Buddhist perspective and others practicing from a contemporary secular perspective (Monteiro, Musten, & Compson, 2015). Of concern is the notion that the richness of a 2,600-year old philosophy can be cheapened by efforts to quantify mindfulness in perhaps an oversimplified fashion (Brown, Ryan, Loverich, Biegel, & West, 2011; Grossman, 2011). Critics have argued that the “denaturing” of mindfulness occurs when researchers define mindfulness too narrowly focusing on tapered dimensions of attention and awareness (Grossman & Van Dam, 2011; Rosch, 2007). The criticism continues that since mindfulness was never intended to be taught in isolation from other aspects of Buddhist practice (such as ethics), Western researchers have left themselves open to questions about the legitimacy of current research directions and its impact on intervention design, and indeed, future understanding of the construct (Grossman, 2011). Furthermore, Grossman and Van Dam (2011) argued that the current bulk of instrumentation, based on inaccurate definition, relies too heavily on a “penchant for indirect observation” (p. 222) suggesting that the self-description of a narrowly defined construct differs from actual evidence of engaged mindfulness practice.

Thus, the main concern lies in efforts to define and measure mindfulness without deeper foundations of first-hand experience. Some have equated this to a process of decontextualization (Grossman, 2011) whereby the original intent of reducing human suffering and the thrust of ethics training has been minimized compared to the utility of symptomatic reprieve (Moteiro, Musten, & Compson, 2015). For example, Shonin and Van Gordon (2015) more recently defined mindfulness as the “process of engaging a full, direct, and active awareness of experienced phenomena that is (i) spiritual in aspect, and (ii) maintained from one moment to the next” (p. 900) to remove any confusion regarding mindfulness’ spiritual nature. In response, researchers have deflected much of the current criticism insisting that, albeit imperfect, the methods of definition and measurement have led to insight surrounding the processes and outcomes affiliated with mindfulness and have pointed the field in important directions for future research (Brown, Loverich, Ryan, Biegel, & West, 2011). Contemporary mindfulness, they contend, in every form of mainstream teaching and intervention has been “decontextualized” to some extent, yet the creation of knowledge for the purposes of designing suitable interventions remains a worthy pursuit. In this view, the mechanisms (how or why change happens) of mindfulness and the potential for healing are important and worthy topics for further exploration (Charters, 2013).

For example, some researchers such as Shapiro and Carlson (2009) identified core “elements” of mindfulness including intention, attention, and attitude. Likewise, Baer, Smith and Allen (2004) underlined four “components” of mindfulness including observing, describing, acting with awareness, and accepting without judgement. Shapiro, Carlson, Astin and Freedman (2006) coined the term “reperceiving” (p. 377) to represent one mechanism of change, describing an overarching non-judgmental openness to awareness and a shift in attention that would promote additional mechanisms including self-regulation, values clarification, cognitive,

emotional and behavioural flexibility, and exposure (meaning one could sit longer with uncomfortable feelings leading to the elimination of a fearful response). Similarly, Baer (2009) pointed to “self-focused attention” (p. 17) as a mechanism of mindfulness that promotes decentering and constructive responses, and reduces fear, rumination, and avoidance.

The main challenges moving forward it seems is to evaluate what is being learned compared to what we believe we are teaching, in order to ensure that contemporary interventions carry forward the core intentions of traditional mindfulness beyond symptom relief in order to sustain and spread well-being over the long term (Baer, 2011; Monterio, Musten, & Compson, 2015). At the same time, Van Gordon, Shonin, Griffiths, and Singh (2015) have respectfully pointed out that “in the spirit of both Buddhist and contemporary secular mindfulness teaching ideals, perhaps an appropriate point has been reached for the scientific and Buddhist communities to work more closely together and as a single mindfulness community” (p. 55). Regarding mindfulness with children (discussed in the next section), Harnett and Dawe (2010) speculated that despite the beneficial outcomes associated with children and families, mindfulness was “unlikely to be the sole variable responsible for the changes in outcomes” (p. 207). I am inclined to agree that other factors are likely involved in the change process and I will discuss this further later in this thesis. Whatever the efforts of researchers to uncover the prevailing qualities of mindfulness responsible for change, Kabat-Zinn (2011) cautioned that this process may lead to further depreciation of an experiential process that is deeply personal. It would seem that the more one deepens their relationship with mindfulness practice, the more difficult it is to articulate the description in words alone.

Thus, Rosch (2007, p. 263) stated that rather than risk compartmentalizing the ingredients of mindfulness, what is needed when studying mindfulness is “openness, wisdom, and creative

ferment”, hence the need to approach mindfulness in a more holistic and creative way. I align with researchers such as Rosch who have approached mindfulness research from a holistic perspective and suggested that the more one learns and practices mindfulness, the less useful word-based definitions become. Instead, mindfulness as a practice and way of living is closest to understanding when it is experienced (Hick, 2010).

Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) with youth. In general, mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) refer to adapted applications of MBSR in a wide variety of contexts though general agreement on what specifically constitutes an MBI is a matter of ongoing discussion largely dependent on the theories that underpin different methods of facilitation (Cullen, 2011; Shonin, Van Gordon, & Griffiths, 2013). This being said, MBIs share the principles of mindfulness to generate insight and encourage a healthy mental state (Cullen, 2011). Evolving from the grassroots of the popularized MBSR in North America (Black, 2014; Cullen, 2011), researchers such as Greenberg and Harris (2012) suggested that mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) are an encouraging practice and universally relevant for youth populations. Indeed, the emergence of mindfulness as a centerpiece in the therapeutic use of contemplative practices for children and youth has received considerable interest in recent years. However, large scale studies demonstrating effectiveness with children are few (Harnett & Dawe, 2012).

The study of mindfulness with young people is relatively new, emerging over the past 10 years, with researchers providing a rationale for using mindfulness with various populations of children and youth (Burke, 2010; Willard & Saltzman, 2015; Zack, Saekow, Kelly, & Radke, 2014), including anxious children (van de Weijer-Bergsma, Langenberg, Brandsma, Oort, & Bögels, 2014) adolescents with attention and behaviour control deficits (Bögels, Hoogstad, van Dun, de Schutter, & Restifo, 2008), and children and youth in residential treatment (Abrams,

2008). Mindfulness was also reported to help children and youth develop constructive coping skills (Hooker & Fodor, 2008; Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008; Wongtongkam, Ward, Day, & Winefield, 2014). In general, among children and youth, mindfulness has been facilitated in order to reduce stress, anxiety, to increase self-esteem and to develop factors related to resilience such as the development of prosocial behaviours and healthy peer relationships (Burke, 2010; Coholic, 2011).

Researchers conducting recent reviews of this expanding literature illustrated that the majority of the existing literature has reported on studies in schools and health-care settings. (Tan, 2015; Zack, Saekow, Kelly, & Radke, 2014; Zoogman, Goldberg, Hoyt, & Miller, 2014) [for recent reviews of mindfulness with youth in education, see Felver, Celis-de Hoyos, Tezanos, & Singh (2015), Greenberg and Harris (2011), Meiklejohn et al (2012), and Harnett and Dawe (2012)]. Within these settings, researchers have generally focused on the application of MBIs that target a specific clinical group of youth (such as those exhibiting ADHD for example) or have evaluated manualized MBIs that target universal populations within schools (e.g., *MindUP* (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). For one example, Himmelstein, Hastings, Shapiro, and Heery (2012) demonstrated that incarcerated youth related participation in a 10-week MBI to “an increase in the ability to regulate both mental and emotional content, as well as physical actions” (p. 234). Furthermore, the youth in that study stated that they enjoyed participating in the MBI. Overall, promising results have been reported with the caveat being relatively weak methodological designs, and a lack of adequate measures and/or follow-up data. Thus, researchers have advised the use of restraint in claiming absolute “effectiveness” (Frank, Jennings & Greenberg, 2103; Metz et al., 2013; Zoogman, Goldberg, Hoyt, & Miller, 2014).

Two recently published examples stand as notable exceptions (given stronger methodological design) and contribute to the nascent literature promoting widespread adoption of MBIs within schools to improve academic performance and prosocial behaviour (Bakosh, Snow, Tobias, Houlihan, & Barbosa-Leiker, 2015; Schonert-Reichl, et al., 2015). At the same time that these researchers are urging the development of appropriate tools to evaluate effectiveness of some MBIs with youth, others are calling for increased exploration of the suitability of MBIs that have been specially-tailored (in this case, using arts-based methods) to populations of youth with unique challenges and high needs. This speaks to the current orientation of the field as a whole, and my decision to further explore mindfulness and resilience qualitatively from the viewpoints of youth transitioning out of foster care.

My doctoral study builds on previous research where I helped to develop, facilitate, and study an arts-based mindfulness group program with vulnerable children aged 8-12 years old. The 12-week program that we developed is called the Holistic Arts-Based Program (HAP) (Coholic, Eys, & Loughheed, 2012; Coholic, 2011; Coholic, Loughheed, & Cadell, 2009). HAP utilized arts-based and experiential methods to teach mindfulness for the purposes of developing self-concept and resilience. The program was developed from research with vulnerable children and was not based on MBSR or another program initially developed for adults. It also hinges on the use of arts-based and experiential activities to teach mindfulness.

Developmentally, the use of experiential activities for children and adolescents is appropriate and highly relevant because youth are provided the creative space to express non-verbally rather than relying solely on verbal communication, given that many youth are ill-equipped to speak about their feelings. Additionally, these methods have proven useful in their ability to engage vulnerable children and circumvent the usual wariness that many of these

children display towards anything that resembles counselling. Moreover, youth in care often lack the skills required to participate fully in CBT, such as the ability to sit still or focus for more than a few moments consecutively, or complete worksheets independently (Cohen, Mannarino, Kliethermes, & Murray, 2012). Also in HAP, mindfulness was taught using a strengths-based approach to build on the existing capacities of the group members and replicate the process of positive adaptation that participants already displayed in their lives outside of the group (Coholic, Fraser, Robinson, & Lougheed, 2012). In addition to utilizing a strength-based approach, facilitators harnessed the power of having fun and social group work, which had availed itself as a key finding in earlier research (Coholic, Lebreton, & Lougheed, 2009). So, while many MBIs for children may have evolved from MBSR and MBCT, it is important to point out that not all MBIs, including the one I developed for my doctoral research, use a cognitive-behavioural platform to facilitate teaching and learning about mindfulness (Coholic, Lougheed, & Eys, 2012; Klatt, Harpster, Browne, White, & Case-Smith, 2013; Semple & Lee, 2011). Arts-based and holistic approaches to mindfulness, such as those proposed in my study, may be more feasible, suitable, meaningful, and beneficial for vulnerable youth such as youth transitioning out of foster care. This may especially be true for youth that do not have the resources/supports to endure the emotionally-challenging aspects of more traditional treatment processes nor the skills to engage with meditation and homework.

As Rosch (2007) suggested, a less predetermined process involving mindfulness can create a dynamic arena that is not solely focused on the results of treatment. Moreover, not all youth who have experienced severe challenges require traditional treatment (Cohen, Mannarino, & Deblinger, 2006). Youth who do not exhibit the degree of symptomatology necessary for a mental health disorder may still benefit from skill development to cope effectively with stress, to

develop goals, to problem-solve, and to foster self-respect and collaboration with others (Goldstein & Brooks, 2013). It may be more effective for some youth to shore up defences and learn skills such as how to relax, focus, and concentrate; how to listen to one's thoughts; and how to identify, delineate between, and understand one's feelings while being engaged positively in a fun and strengths-based environment (Coholic, 2010; Crenshaw & Hardy, 2007; Darley, Heath, Cohen & Darley, 2007).

As we know, vulnerable youth such as youth transitioning out of foster care are notoriously difficult to engage in treatment or helping services for a number of reasons including the lack of availability of responsible care providers at crucial periods of adolescent development a past history of negative interaction and/or lack of trust towards helping/health providers and others in positions of authority, and individual characteristics such as developmental challenges that require novel, strength-based approaches (Baer, Peterson, & Wells, 2004; Kerker & Dore, 2006; Tanner, Secor-Turner, Garwick, Sieving, & Rush, 2012). It may also be suggested that appropriate treatment interventions have not yet been designed to retain these youth or to engage them in a way that is meaningful and relevant to them.

In summary, for the purposes of the current study, the use of the term mindfulness referred to “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experiences moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145). In this way, I embraced an accepted definition from a pioneer in the field and aligned with calls to include qualitative methods in mindfulness research that enhance researchers' abilities “to trace and embrace novel facets of mindfulness” (Sauer et al., 2012, p.). A holistic approach to the study of mindfulness embraces creative qualitative methods of teaching and studying mindfulness that have received little research interest thus far, yet are

emerging as a required direction to improve the clarity of the processes experienced by participants when they are participating in mindfulness-based interventions (Chiesa, 2013). Moreover, it is anticipated that creative approaches for future mindfulness research will allow researchers to study its application and benefits with a diverse range of people, including youth experiencing unique challenges and serious needs.

Arts-Based Methods with Young People

“Arts-based methods” refer to the use of creative methods associated with multiple art mediums. These methods have a 75-year history in the helping professions, advancing the use of art-related therapies (e.g., dance, music, poetry) alongside medicine and psychology (Rappaport, 2014). McNiff (2014) referred to the creative process as “healing agent” (p. 40) with the role of the facilitator being to assist others to “participate as fully as possible.” Arts-based methods have also been utilized in research as a way for participants to occupy an active role in creating, and interpreting their own art work and learning (Blodgett et al, 2013). As such, arts-based methods are viewed as potentially transformative in their ability to facilitate participation with vulnerable populations and encourage an empowering experience among research participants (Clover, 2007). This is congruent with a child and youth care perspective that values social justice and challenges the legitimacy of hegemonic structures.

The use of arts-based methods differs from traditional “art therapy” in the level of training involved to become a certified art therapist and also in the ways art therapists use art creations, that is, an art therapist may interpret a creation of art. In the current study, arts-based methods were used to teach the concept of mindfulness to youth, to facilitate engagement in the group process, and to assist participants to express themselves in meaningful ways. Any art that the participants created was not subject to the interpretation of the facilitator. Reflecting the

importance of the relationship in any helping intervention, one accomplished artist recently remarked to me: “you never tell a person what their art means” (Lockhart, 2015, personal communication).

The art mediums employed in the study included painting, drawing, music, and experiential activities which emphasized collaborative play and movement. I chose to implement arts-based methods as a way to engage participants who presented with unique challenges and who required an enjoyable and meaningful way of learning and practicing mindfulness that would promote success. Given the continuum of vulnerability, maturity and development of youth during the research process, it is incumbent on researchers to consider alternative ways for young people’s voices to be heard (Lambert, Glacken, & McCarron, 2013). Since the use of arts-based methods mirrors experiences from most young people’s childhoods, art becomes a natural youth-centred point of entry for teaching and learning (Carter & Ford, 2013).

Researchers have stated that arts-based methods can provide an important instrument for a broad range of children to express themselves (Coad, 2007; Lyon, & Carabelli, 2015). This may be because a person, through the experience of art, feels more emotionally and/or spiritually connected to themselves, contributing to an elevated feeling of personal well-being and overall health (Coholic, 2010; Hartwell, 2013; Irwin, Rogers, & Wan, 1999). Art enables people to facilitate self-expression and to experience a greater sense of self-awareness (Coholic, 2011). The use of arts-based methods with children and youth has shown great promise for improving the health and well-being of several populations of children who have experienced trauma including refugee children (Yohani, 2008), acute-care psychiatric patients (Tyson & Baffour, 2004), severely maltreated children (Coleman & Macintosh, 2015), youth from low-income communities (Harley & Hunn, 2015), and children living in foster care (Coholic, Loughheed, &

Lebreton, 2009). Moreover, in a recent review of literature exploring the use of the creative arts, researchers found favourable support for behaviour change, self-confidence, self-esteem, and physical activity (Bungay & Vella-Burrows, 2013).

While the use of art and play in helping practices with children has a long history, very few researchers have explored the use of arts-based methods as a way to teach mindfulness, although this is beginning to change. Recently, Rappaport (2014) published a book entitled “Mindfulness and the Arts Therapies”, which provides several examples of how mindfulness can be incorporated by way of the therapeutic use of the arts, and utilized in clinical applications such as working with cancer survivors (Peterson & Karnell, 2014) and healing from trauma (Frank Tania, 2014). For example, von Daler, and Schwanbeck (2014) described how merging Expressive Arts Therapy with the core mindfulness skills of Dialectical Behaviour Therapy can help clients who are emotionally overwhelmed and requiring lots of structure in intervention to still access the creative healing potential of the arts. Integrating arts-based activities such as working with clay into a lesson about skills related to “self-soothing” enabled clients to make a concrete connection to the spoken material. Likewise, integrating art with MBSR for children, for example, assisted the exercises to be more meaningful (Saltzman & Goldin, 2008). Moreover, interviews with teachers supported the implementation of meditation, yoga movements and breathing exercises alongside visual and written expression to reduce stress and improve classroom behaviour with third grade students (Klatt, Harpster, Browne, White, & Case-Smith, 2013).

Based on the research discussed above, as well as my earlier experiences with HAP, I believed that using arts-based methods would be relevant and meaningful for youth in care. I anticipated that arts-based methods would provide a gateway to learning about mindfulness in

ways more engaging than by only using language. Some youth may have difficulty learning mindfulness in more prescribed ways due to their life experiences of trauma, loss, and of being taken into care; the impacts of which interfere with their ability to pay attention and focus. Incorporating the arts allows the flexibility and creativity required to tailor methods to the social, cultural and spiritual needs of participants, particularly those with high needs (Coholic, Eys, & Lougheed, 2012; Rappaport, 2014). It was also anticipated that arts-based methods would create a non-threatening starting point to maximize their inclusion in the research process, and facilitate their engagement in the group activities on the basis that the activities would complement existing personal strengths and harness the therapeutic potential for having fun (Linzmayr & Halpenny, 2013). Moreover, expressing mindfulness through art also serves as a positive reminder of the experience that participants can revisit again (Rappaport, 2014). So, rather than use homework assignments in the form of worksheets to extend the learning from the group as might be the case utilizing a CBT approach, the activities in my group could be repeated independently outside the group. Participants were encouraged to place the subsequent artwork created in their bedroom or on the fridge door to encourage daily mindfulness practice and dialogue with others about the group activities.

Importantly, the incorporation of arts-based methods helped this study address the call for alternative, more holistic frameworks and approaches to working with vulnerable youth (Crenshaw, 2006; Tan, Yang, & Yang, 2014). Overall, there is a dearth of evidence related to the helpfulness and effectiveness of alternative, more holistic approaches to working with vulnerable youth as well as how these approaches are perceived by the youth. While there is growing interest in the area of arts-based and mindfulness methods, much of the current emphasis has not yet focused on exploring arts-based/mindfulness methods as preventative-type interventions that

might assist youth transitioning out of foster care face to deal with challenges before serious problems occur, despite calls to include alternative and inclusive approaches within the study of mindfulness (Sauer et al., 2012), and resilience (Panter-Brick & Leckman, 2013; Ungar, 2013). The research aimed to make a valuable contribution to exploring these gaps in our understanding and knowledge by investigating the implementation of a holistic framework for working with youth transitioning out of foster care since, to the best of my knowledge; no studies have investigated the use of MBIs with this population of youth.

Summary

This concludes the review of current research literature that supported the development of the current study in four main ways. First, my study addressed calls for studying preventative services that may prelude further treatment with a difficult to reach population of youth. Second, the study extended the research regarding the apparent usefulness of MBIs with younger children in care to explore the feasibility of such methods with an older population. Third, this research contributed to growing understanding of resilience from the perspectives of youth transitioning out of foster care. Fourth, this research is unique in the exploration of how mindfulness may be linked to resilience in older youth, by seeking to explore the possible intersections between learning about mindfulness and developing resilience.

In order to provide the contextual background supporting the research rationale and purpose, I focused this review of the literature on three broad areas including research focused on the challenges experienced by children and youth transitioning out of foster care; an overview of resilience research underscoring the lack of literature that incorporates the perspectives and experiences of vulnerable youth; and the evolution of mindfulness research to include an emphasis on more creative, expressive and less prescribed methods of teaching/learning

mindfulness. The focus is on a holistic and creative approach, which may be more welcomed, needed, suitable, relevant and meaningful for youth in care. As I have summarized in this chapter, a recent upsurge in attention has thrust this unique population of youth into the spotlight. In the following chapter, I explicate the appropriate research methods that were selected to facilitate an exploratory research process in this challenging and exciting field.

Chapter Three

Research Methodology

While the promising use of Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs) among young people is a burgeoning field, the specific implementation of arts-based mindfulness methods with vulnerable youth is one area that requires attention. To the best of my knowledge, despite calls to develop preventative strength-based approaches that foster resilience, researchers have not explored the use of arts-based mindfulness methods with youth transitioning out of foster care, and little is known about what resilience actually means to this population of youth. As a result, I decided to seek out their perspectives to help determine the suitability and feasibility of these methods. In this chapter, I frame the current study within its research paradigm, effectively locating the research within its ontological and epistemological viewpoints, and explicating the decision to use qualitative methods. I also describe the study's theoretical framework including the current orientation of child and youth care practice that also helped to shape the methodology. I outline the research questions, the use of semi-structured interviews, the sampling method, and describe the participants. Finally, in this chapter, I present details of the data collection and analysis, and underline the mechanisms utilized to promote continuous researcher reflexivity and rigour. To begin, the research paradigm is considered.

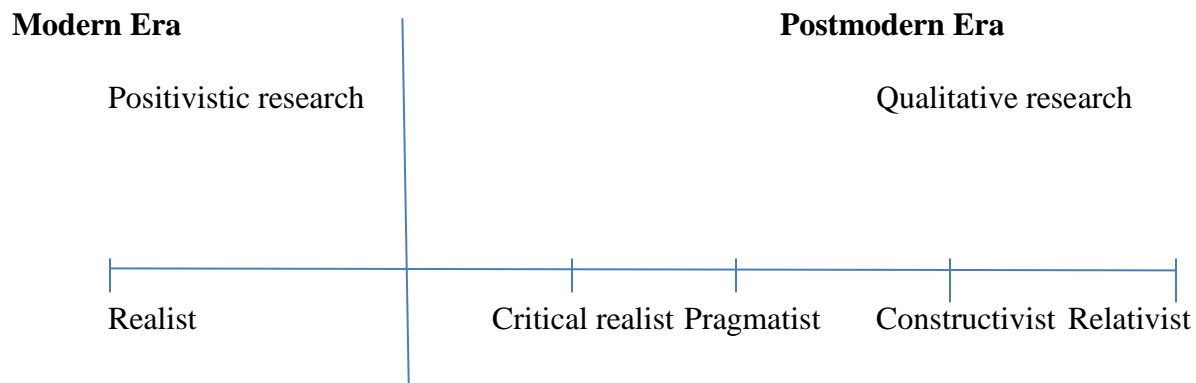
Research Paradigm

Denzin and Lincoln (2005b) referred to a paradigm as “a basic set of beliefs that guide action” (p. 183). In framing a research study, one must consider a research paradigm; the importance of which is paramount in acknowledging ontological and epistemological influences on all aspects of the research process including, but not limited to, data collection, analysis, and interpretation of findings. Creswell (2007) pointed to four distinct paradigms he termed

“worldviews” (p. 19) including post-positivism, social constructivism, advocacy/participatory, and pragmatism. Other researchers have made similar categorizations based on overlapping ideas about the inherent beliefs the researcher brings to the process and how research should be conducted (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b; Miles & Huberman, 1994). For example, Butler-Kisber (2010) proposed an “ontological continuum” (p. 6) to help researchers consider the perspectives they bring to the work (see Figure 1). Establishing the worldviews one adheres to can be challenging for researchers because sometimes it is possible to see benefits between different ontological and epistemological approaches (Denzin, 1998). Furthermore, researchers’ understandings may shift along a continuum of multiple ontological and epistemological perspectives and “any given researcher can be more than one thing at the same time, can be fitted into both the tender and tough-minded categories” (Denzin, 1998, p. 338), which underlines why “it is the way researcher perspectives are explained and made transparent that is most important” (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 8). The process of articulating ontological and epistemological perspectives can improve the overall study by revealing the assumptions that a researcher brings to the research process.

Figure 1.

Qualitative Inquiry Continuum (Butler-Kisber, 2010)



Crotty (1998) proposed a useful approach that asks the researcher to articulate elemental viewpoints, which form the research paradigm. These elements include: epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, and methods.

Epistemology

The epistemological assumptions of the researcher deal with the theory of knowledge; deciding what kind of knowledge is possible to know (Maynard, 1994), and how the researcher determines they know it (Creswell, 2007). Constructionism is one such epistemology that proposes “all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). From a constructionist perspective, understandings of truth, or what we come to refer to as true, are constructed through our engagement with the world and this engagement can differ from person to person depending on social location (Easton, 2010). The application of a constructionist lens helps researchers consider the role our collective culture has on the creation and communication of knowledge (Crotty, 1998).

Some theorists and researchers make an important distinction between constructionism and constructivism. While researchers employing the former focus on the shared collective meaning of knowledge, researchers utilizing the latter concentrate on the meaning-making role of the individual (Crotty, 1998; Davis & Sumara, 2002). Constructivism is probably more relevant for my study as I focused on the individual role of meaning-making relying on a cultivated relationship with the participants to render an evolving analysis that sought to understand their experiences through semi-structured interviews. However, the role of culture in the process of meaning-making for youth transitioning out of foster care cannot be ignored.

Ultimately, I aimed to honour the idea that constructivism “points up the unique experience of each of us. It suggests that each one’s way of making sense of the world is as valid and worthy of respect as any other” (Crotty, 1998, p. 58). Indeed, an inherent objective of constructivism is to rely on the perspectives of participants to inform findings (Creswell, 2007), and using constructivism helps support the view that implementing holistic methods in research may open the door to understanding things in different ways (Vygotsky, 1978). I hoped that this process could foster change and contribute toward evolving constructions of knowledge. Indeed, the use of a constructivist perspective supports the belief that research can be utilized to foster positive change. Finally, I adopted a constructivist epistemology to inform the study’s theoretical perspective, which helped me provide the theoretical backing and context for the selected research methodology including the design, procedures, and process.

Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical perspective of my research aligns with the epistemological standpoint described earlier, and helps to support the underpinnings for the research methodology. In other words, the theoretical perspective helped me to ground the assumptions that are embedded in my approach. As Crotty (1998) pointed out, “different ways of viewing the world shape different ways of researching the world” (p. 66). When researchers elaborate a theoretical perspective, they provide the basis for understanding the assumptions reflected in the methodology. In the current study, the theoretical perspective is based on values and knowledge inherent to the discipline of Child and Youth Care.

Child and Youth Care (CYC) is a dynamic helping profession committed to young people’s vibrant growth and development. The expansiveness of the profession cannot be understated, and though there is overlap with related human services such as nursing, education,

and social work that share similar values, CYC remains the only discipline wholly dedicated to young people “as a profession” (Anglin, 1999, p. 149). As such, hallmarks of the field include utilizing strength-based approaches, working collaboratively with families and other helping/health professionals, advocating for social justice, and meeting children and youth situated within diverse social and relational contexts (Anglin, 1999; Charles & Garfat, 2009). Moreover, CYC practice is not restricted to occasional office visits but rather is predicated on being with the individual “in-the-moment” (p. 8) living and breathing experience as it emerges (Garfat & Fulcher, 2011).

While the discipline is continuing to evolve, no one theory has had greater influence on the discipline as a whole than Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) theoretical perspective on the ecology of human development (Ferguson, Pence, & Denholm, 1993a, Mattingly, Stuart, & VanderVen, 2002). Bronfenbrenner (1979) drew attention to “functional interdependence between living organisms and their surroundings” (p. xii). While this view was not new at the time, he increased the legitimacy of the idea that the contexts an individual interacts with are of incredible importance to the study of human development (Derksen, 2010). The influence of Bronfenbrenner’s work is also clearly evident in the underpinnings of Ungar and his colleagues’ social and ecological understandings of resilience, which form an important foundation in the current study (Ungar, Ghazinour, & Richter, 2013). An important value of CYC that coincides with an ecological understanding of child development is identifying existing strengths and assets within social and cultural contexts, and ensuring that any/all actions are client-centred. This means the individual is an active agent in any/all decision-making. This requires at all times a high degree of self-awareness and accountability on the part of the CYC practitioner (Stuart, 2013). One such consideration in the current study includes focusing on the concept of resilience

as informed by the participants themselves. This is in contrast to earlier research that relied on samples of participants who form the dominant culture in developed countries (Kagitçibasi, 2007; Ungar & Liebenberg, 2011). Unequivocally, these conceptualizations of resilience did not represent marginalized people living alongside mainstream populations, such as youth transitioning out of foster care (Ungar, 2008).

In summary, some of the values of my own CYC practice include inclusiveness and collaboration, and an emphasis on client-centered and strengths-based approaches with youth who live on the margins. These views are reflected in the current study most notably through the use of qualitative methods; a focus on establishing community-based partnerships between researcher, service provider, school, and family; and the adaptation of group methods for youth transitioning out of foster care that meet youth “where they are” rather than applying methods from the “top down.”

Qualitative Research

The research methodology I applied assists me in explaining the proposed steps to undertake the current study and the rationale for the research methods selected (Crotty, 1998). Using qualitative inquiry best allows for an in-depth exploration of phenomena (Morse & Field, 1995; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) by focusing in a comprehensive manner on situations and experiences of people, often using the views of participants to understand, explain and describe an experience (Maxwell, 1997). Furthermore, the usefulness of qualitative research for understanding the transition of youth to adulthood has previously received support based on the “need to hear” (p. 243) from individuals who have made that transition in order to translate existing theories into policies and interventions that can provide support for these youth (Munson, 2007). In order to successfully conceptualize services for these youth, efforts must be

made to learn and appreciate the personal, group, and environmental considerations that assist this transition. To this end, using qualitative methods complement youth-centred and strength-based approaches because they empower youth by demonstrating that their views are important, and build upon existing assets, rather than focusing on deficits as long-term barriers. In this way, these methods are more holistic and less pathologizing.

A qualitative inquiry is well suited to achieve the aims of this study because mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs), to the best of my knowledge, have not been studied among youth transitioning out of foster care. As was discussed in the previous chapter, researchers working within the emerging field of MBIs with young people have suggested that efforts move towards assessing the effectiveness of these models (Burke, 2010; Tan, 2015). Moreover, Harnett and Dawe (2012) have advocated for a greater understanding of the mechanisms responsible for change within mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs).

However, in areas where mindfulness is being facilitated differently compared to more traditional approaches, researchers must first determine the suitability of these methods for a particular client group or challenge to ascertain whether there is a rationale for further delivery and study of these programs. This is where I hoped to make a meaningful and innovative contribution: by developing/facilitating a group that considered, and was responsive to, youth involved with the child welfare system. So, while researchers are now beginning to document the appropriateness of mindfulness practice paired with arts-based approaches, few researchers have approached mindfulness directly with youth as a holistic practice. To the best of my knowledge, this was the first study designed to explore these methods with youth transitioning out of foster care, and the first to explore these methods delivered by way of a social group work approach.

Research Questions

The following research questions were developed to guide my study. These include one central research question and four supporting questions:

- How are arts-based mindfulness interventions suitable, feasible, and beneficial (if at all) for youth transitioning out of foster care?
- How do these youth understand mindfulness and resilience?
- What are the youths' experiences of participating in an arts-based mindfulness program?
- What were the youths' experiences of learning mindfulness?
- What connections can be made between learning mindfulness and developing resilience?

I explored mindfulness and resilience with youth transitioning out of foster care to develop an appreciation of how participants understood those concepts. I also explored usefulness/benefits of an arts-based mindfulness group with this population of youth with the overarching goal of determining the feasibility of this type of intervention among these youth. Specifically, I employed semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions as a way to explore in-depth the participants' experiences of learning mindfulness, participating in the group sessions, how they dealt with adversity, and their ideas about health, wellness, and growing up well.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The use of semi-structured interviews is in keeping with the goals of an exploratory study, which sought to generate knowledge from the viewpoints of the participants. Semi-structured interviews promoted dialogue with participants traditionally underrepresented in research literature. I hoped that this process would contribute to the growing discussion around how best to address their needs. Semi-structured interviews allowed for the application of open-ended questions and exploration of tangential topic areas and the youths' stories. Furthermore,

this type of interviewing meant I could seek clarification to ensure participants' viewpoints were accurately understood. The interviews provided the means for participants to become engaged in the research process in a meaningful way and highlighted the importance of the participants in helping to address the research questions.

The development of the interview questions were an integral part of the research process. This process began by expanding my knowledge related to resilience, mindfulness, arts-based methods, and research involving older youth involved in the child welfare system. This was completed by partaking in a thorough review of the research literature. I sought additional guidance on this process by reading previous accounts of the process of interview guide development (Krauss, Hamzah, Nor, Omar, Suandi, & Ismail, 2009). Based on this review, the guiding interview questions were formulated for a broad exploration of mindfulness and resilience. In order to promote a current and representative conceptualization of resilience to the participants in this study, the initial interview guide included nine catalyst questions developed in previous research encompassing resilience from non-mainstream perspectives (Ungar et al. 2008). This is in contrast to the bulk of previous research that has previously investigated resilience using mainstream conceptualizations of the term that had little to do with the population researchers had sought to understand (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999; Ungar, 2008). By utilizing these interview questions, it was anticipated that the process of exploring resilience with youth transitioning out of foster care would begin at a more appropriate point. Importantly, I wanted the definition of resilience used in this study to originate from research that had been informed by individuals whose experience more closely resembled the youth in the current study. The decision to adopt these initial questions helped ensure a level of consistency across multiple

interviews and theoretical connectedness to relevant research literature (Pedersen, Delmar, Falkmar, & Gronkjaer, 2015).

In consultation with my academic supervisor, I made some refinements to the interview guide after each set of interviews were completed (see Appendix A for a complete list of the interview questions). These changes included revising how some questions were posed to the participants and adding (or substituting) additional questions to the guide itself. I made these decisions so that the research questions would be optimally addressed. Importantly, these decisions related to: new ideas that I had about how best to explore the research questions at specific times during the research process, and my interpretation of the participants' comfort level participating in the research process.

The first addition to the interview guide included substituting a question related to what they hoped to learn in the group (from the first interview) with a list of questions focused on gaining information about their experience of having learned about mindfulness. Similarly, I also developed additional questions prior to both the second and third interviews in order to elicit information about what elements of mindfulness, and of group participation, the participants felt would benefit them after the group had ended (in the second interview), and what parts of mindfulness and group participation the participants had kept in their lives four months later (in the third interview). Also, between the first and second interviews, I made a conscious decision to question participants more directly about their own experiences after I became more confident that the participants were committed to continuing their participation in the research project. This meant that from the outset, the interview guide included similar questions but the questions were asked more directly and focused on the youths' personal experiences in the second and third

interviews; initially, I did not want to pursue the subject matter too directly as I did not want to make the participants feel uncomfortable (which could have fostered attrition from the study).

Semi-structured interviews provided the mechanism to explore these areas with the participants at three separate points in time: pre- and post-group, and at a follow up period, four months after the group ended. Next, I examine some of the biases that I brought to the research process in an effort to locate myself in the study and remain transparent about the decision-making that took place throughout the process.

Researcher Reflexivity

Given the complexity and interpretive nature of qualitative research, the reciprocal impact of the researcher and the research has long been acknowledged (Creswell, 2007; Denzin, 1994). My interpretations of the participants in this study were influenced by my own values and beliefs, which constantly shifted in the advent of new experiences and understanding. In order to improve my credibility as a researcher, I accepted that personal views and values constructed through my identity will shape and influence the findings, and that I must continually seek to understand how that happens (Jootun, McGhee, & Marland, 2009). Undoubtedly, my interest and focus on change stems from my training as a CYC worker, and my desire to use the skills I have developed to assist others, particularly marginalized youth, in improving their health outcomes. Additionally, my awareness of inequities facing marginalized youth such as funding gaps in housing for youth transitioning out of foster care have shaped my motivation to engage in research. I recognized that the way I continued to be emotionally connected to these subject areas invariably affected my approach, and that openly reporting these biases throughout was important to maintaining the transparency and credibility of the findings.

Researcher reflexivity refers to the degree to which an investigator manages their presuppositions within the research process (Walsh & Downe, 2006). The objective of doing so is to make explicit the assumptions that form the ethical issues and decision-making that can further marginalize participants rather than serve to build more equitable processes in research. Applying researcher reflexivity, I considered the inherent biases and assumptions associated with my identity (e.g. white, middleclass socioeconomic status, Euro-Canadian heritage, male gender, child and youth care worker) that I brought to the study. I considered these social locations and developed an analysis of my biases in order to be as transparent as possible so that the quality of my work can be accurately evaluated. Specifically, my choices of the questions to pose to explore phenomena and my conscious and unconscious decisions throughout the research process are presupposed through the filter of my identity. Remaining cognisant of how my epistemological assumptions influenced decisions made throughout the research process helped promote increased self-awareness and researcher reflexivity (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). In doing so, it is anticipated that the quality of the research process is improved because of a heightened level of transparency linking the work with its influences. My analysis of these bias and assumptions begins with a personal introduction, followed by an examination of the multiple roles I occupied in the research process.

I am the eldest of three siblings raised in a white, mainstream, and middle-class family. The use of the term “mainstream” refers to my acknowledgement that though our family did not have excessive access to material wealth, I understood from an early age that there were other families who operated with far less social and financial capital. Mainstream also denotes my acknowledgement of being raised in a dual-earner, Standard North American Family (SNAF) in a community where the vast majority of families around me were organized similarly (white

heterogeneous couples who are both employed and reared children). I also recognize a personal moral “compass” and direction in decision making to serve the interests of others while fulfilling my own needs as a white male, and place much of this direction in decision making on a stable upbringing in a small rural farming community characterized by healthy, high quality relationships including adult family members, non-kin adult community members, and many peers being raised in a similar supported way. Though my own religious convictions are non-existent, I acknowledge the role of Christianity in my life through its dominant moral influence in the community I grew up in. Finally, I would be remiss not to acknowledge my gender as both a proliferator of past educational and professional success, as well as a likely predictor of future attainment in these and many other areas. This acknowledgement of privilege is meant as a first step in bringing awareness to my own location in the research process.

In this research process, as a white, middle class male, I also occupied roles that included researcher, group co-facilitator, and child care worker employed as an outreach worker in the communities where the study took place. In each of these roles, I acknowledge my position alongside participants influencing how knowledge was produced. Still, researching and writing from my perspective as a relative outsider to the ‘location’ of participants, I do seek to be an ally in the process of pursuing change that will ultimately address the systemic inequality that exists between youth in care (former and current) versus youth not in foster care.

The complexity of occupying multiple roles in qualitative research is well-documented (Cartwright & Limandri, 1997; Hamberg & Johansson, 1999) and other researchers have discussed these issues including presenting the (multiple) role(s) of the researcher to the participants, deciding upon the boundaries between participant-researcher, and exploring the participants’ past experience with research, if any (Jack, 2008). I considered how occupying

multiple roles in the research process influenced the overall study. Decisions related to some of these issues were straightforward. For example, all of the participants knew, by way of a consent letter and referral interview, that I was a student responsible for facilitating a research process with the intent of advancing my own academic status in pursuit of a doctoral degree. Regarding the boundaries between participant-researcher, I explained to participants that I was bound by legal and ethical decision-making (e.g. reporting suspicions related to child welfare) and I had a responsibility to help participants connect with health and legal services if they were required. At various points during the process, I was also able to explore with participants the role of research in general and inquire about any past experiences and their interest in contributing to improved understanding about their unique perspectives.

As a doctoral student with prior research training and experience as a child and youth worker in rural and northern communities, including my specific experience of being an outreach worker in the community where the current study took place, I brought to the process previous experiences that shaped the development of this study. For example, my background as a child and youth care worker as well as my personal comfort in utilizing ‘hands-on’ types of activities influenced the design and facilitation of the group activities, including the training of the co-facilitator. My experience working with youth in group settings and in urban and wilderness contexts using experiential methods was a benefit to the development of the arts-based activities. Many activities involved inviting the youth to actively participate in collaborative activities such as ‘trust leaning’ where participants learned how to support one another by learning steps that concluded with the participants willingly losing their balance, and being safely lowered to the floor. For many helping practitioners, this is a move away from traditional methods where client and practitioner sit facing one another and do not have any physical contact. While I am very

comfortable in engaging in methods that involve testing one's physical abilities, I also understand that many helping practitioners are not as confident with this because of their clinical training and experiences may not have focused on how to operationalize these types of methods. To this end, I assisted the co-facilitator to incorporate approaches that would merge effective group facilitation with arts and experiential-based methods. By using "challenge by choice", participants commanded their exposure to, and benefit from, activities by first hearing about the activity and its purpose, before choosing their degree of participation (Schoel, Prouty, & Radcliffe, 1988). With challenge by choice established in a group environment, activities that infringed on personal space and involved movement were more likely to be considered because participants could opt out if they chose to do so (Tucker, 2009).

The decision to facilitate rather than train others to lead the program was in part a reaction to researchers in the mindfulness literature who have raised concerns about the qualification of those teaching mindfulness-based methods to others (McCown, Reibel, & Micozzi, 2010). Hooker and Fodor (2008) suggested that those teaching mindfulness to others should be well-versed in the methods and be actively practicing mindfulness themselves. In this study, the quality of the youths' experiences of the program necessitated that the group sessions were effectively facilitated in order for the participants to have the quality of experience that would then be explored in interview format. In general, there is a lack of people trained in the delivery of arts-based mindfulness methods. From a professional perspective, as a child and youth worker whose background included using experiential methods in the outdoors with youth, and who had been actively involved in the delivery of arts-based mindfulness methods since 2006, I felt I was drawing from a strong foundation to facilitate the group sessions with older youth and to provide guidance to a co-facilitator. More recently, I had also become involved in

the facilitation of two well-known social and emotional learning programs; *MindUP* (Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010) and *Roots of Empathy* (Schonert-Reichl, Smith, Zaidman-Zait, & Hertzman, 2012), which originate from similar philosophical underpinnings to mindfulness. From a more personal perspective, mindfulness and specifically mindful parenting had increasingly become more entwined with my personal way of being for example through regular breathing exercises with my son. So while it may have been more ideal to remain distanced from the group delivery when it came time to discuss with the youth their perceptions about the program, the benefits of a successful group experience outweighed the fact that youth may have been less likely to share negative feedback because of social desirability bias or for fear of hurting my feelings.

I took steps to lessen the fact that the participants may not have been forthcoming during the interviews regarding aspects of the group program they disliked because I was occupying both facilitator and interviewer roles. Overall, I was consistently clear with the participants that in order for this research study to be meaningful and important, the answers I sought to gather were the thoughts and ideas that best represented themselves; not the thoughts and ideas that they believed I wanted to hear, even if this meant saying something that they believed I would find upsetting or unpleasant. I anticipated that the extended contact of interacting with the participants in multiple roles may have enhanced rapport and increased the participants' trust in me, leading to a willingness to share during the interviews. For example, one participant routinely attended a drop-in youth center with her peers and consistently commented how much she enjoyed the atmosphere, meal preparation, and desire for the program to continue. It was apparent that the relationships developed as a result of working as an outreach worker in the communities where participants lived at the time of the study likely helped to establish a level of

trust where participants felt comfortable to share what was really on their mind (Shooter, Paisley, & Sibthorp, 2012).

Other concrete mechanisms to increase researcher reflexivity included time and space to adequately contemplate and analyze decisions, and ongoing journaling to continually revisit and consider all of the decisions made during the research process. This also included accessing support from multiple mentors to discuss decisions with, and to receive feedback from. For example, I shared my understanding of the data with my academic supervisor throughout the data analysis. Based on the feedback I received and our discussions of the data analysis, this process led me to continually reflect on how and why I interpreted the data in a specific way: often related to my level of experience as a researcher and practitioner. For example, in the analysis, I tended to meld similar concepts that required more thoughtful consideration. In contrast, my supervisor was able to help me develop a greater specificity and clarity in my thinking and writing. For example, in an early draft of the results, I referred to an idea in my writing that I called “early independence” and then presented a list of subthemes including an idea about youth having “dual roles” (referring to having responsibilities for taking care of siblings and in some cases providing emotional support for biological parents) to further delineate some of the challenges of the “aging-out” process. Further dialogue with my supervisor about the possible meaning behind the participants’ responses led me to synthesize my ideas (in this case by focusing more narrowly on the roles that participants described and their effect on “growing up quickly”) and the eventual inclusion of “parentification” (an existing phenomenon previously established in the research literature) in the final results of the study. This ongoing exchange with my supervisor helped encourage a deeper, more constructive analysis, ensuring that the intended meaning of the participants’ perspectives was principally represented in the

research findings. Other mentors in the research process included a former graduate supervisor, and an experienced child and youth care worker, who helped me to work through the difficulties I experienced during the research process such as deciding when to intervene clinically with respect to many issues such as perceptions of drug use and decisions about housing that the participants would bring up during the interview. The way I negotiated this decision-making was to defer intervention until later in the interview when the participant and I could discuss further and I felt more at ease at providing feedback and discussing possible next steps such as consulting with the co-facilitator (an MCFD employee).

Location of Study and Recruitment of Participants

The study took place in British Columbia. The Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) is divided into 13 local service areas. The “Coast/North Shore” local service area encompasses an area known as the Sunshine Coast. On what is commonly referred to as the lower Sunshine coast sits the communities within which the study was based. This part of the province is generally considered to be a rural area despite being located less than 100 kilometers from Vancouver (the largest city in the province) because it is separated from the Lower Mainland by a body of water known as the Strait of Georgia, which requires passage by either plane or boat. According to Statistics Canada and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, Gibsons, Sechelt, and the Sechelt Indian Band have permanent populations of 4,437 citizens, 7,251 citizens, and 1,185 citizens respectively. Additionally, this region experiences a large influx of seasonal residents and tourists due to the relative proximity of Vancouver and the idyllic scenic surroundings. There is much disparity in socio-economic status both between and among seasonal and year-round residents, and the impact of rural factors such as transportation and

service access present considerable challenges (Eriksson, Asplund, & Sellström, 2010; Shoveller, Johnson, Prkachin, & Patrick, 2007)

I first formed a collaborative relationship with the MCFD for the provision of an arts-based mindfulness group. This entailed meeting with a Team Leader and requesting consideration of the implementation of a research group designed for youth transitioning out of foster care. The MCFD supported the study by way of providing referrals to the groups and a social worker (an MCFD employee) to co-facilitate the program. Ethical approval for all procedures was granted by the MCFD and Laurentian University's Research Ethics Board (see Appendix B).

Purposeful sampling was used and refers to the intentional selection of individuals who have direct experience with the main themes that will be investigated in a study (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007; Patton, 1990). Moreover, this study was based on a convenience sample within a larger criterion sample scheme (Collins, Onwuegbuzie, & Jiao, 2007), whereby an investigator requests volunteers and enlists the first individuals who fit the required description (Morse & Niehaus, 2009). The decision to utilize purposeful sampling was supported by the need to seek and understand viewpoints of a specific population. The sampling method was heavily assisted by the MCFD through each participant's child care worker, and the team leader for the agency. First, approval to present an information sheet to the team of child care workers was received from the team leader. Next, I facilitated a presentation with the child care workers. Referrals were received following that presentation, and subsequent email and phone contact with individual workers followed each receipt of a referral.

The group of youth that I targeted were youth transitioning out of foster care living within the catchment area who expressed an interest in learning about arts-based mindfulness

activities. Specific inclusion criteria included youth aged 15-19 years who displayed a level of group readiness that necessitated the ability to participate fully and meaningfully in the group with up to four other youth for two hours at a time; this included an ability to sit still for moderate periods of time, to engage in active listening with peers, and to partake in arts-based activities. This determination was made in consultation with the child care worker, the prospective participant, and foster parent. Exclusion criteria included youth who were known by their child-care worker to have serious mental health or developmental problems that would impede their ability to fully participate within a group of their peers without additional 1:1 supports. Due to the appropriateness of referrals, no youth were excluded from the study.

Next, I coordinated visits to meet the youth accompanied by either their child care worker or foster parent, in their homes or at another location chosen by the youth. The purpose of this visit was to further explain the project and the group, and to provide the prospective participant an opportunity to ask any questions they may have had about either the group or the research. Subsequent follow up by phone and/or email with the participant and child care worker and foster parent was made to determine whether the prospective participant was interested in engaging in the group. In the telephone and face to face conversations outlining participation, the general format of the groups and examples of activities were explained. It was made clear to the participants that their participation in the groups was voluntary and part of a research project, and that I was keenly interested in learning about their experiences before and after the groups. Prior to the youth attending the group, informed consent was gathered from them. The process of obtaining consent was completed prior to the first research interviews with each participant and the MCFD child care worker, either at the MCFD offices or in the participant's home. Both during the initial meeting with the researcher, and at the time consent was obtained, it was

outlined to participants that participation was completely voluntary and that they could exit the process at any time without penalty.

Participants

The study aimed to capture views of both males and females so two groups were scheduled with a planned membership of five participants in each group. The determination of an appropriate group size was based on past experiences of facilitating arts and recreation-based groups in experiential settings. Successful experiences have been characterized by small group size and high facilitator to client ratio to allow for a well-trained facilitator to focus on the group's needs and to ensure responsiveness to the potential demands of group participants with high needs (Munton et al., 2002). A decision was made to facilitate same-gendered groups because teenagers may be less hesitant to participate in unfamiliar activities with members of the same gender. Additionally, in this case, a small group size was deemed the most appropriate in order to allow for meaningful contribution and participation by each group member (Malekoff, 2014).

Initially, 10 youth (six identifying as females and four identifying as males) transitioning out of foster care from the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) were purposefully recruited to voluntarily participate in two arts-based mindfulness research groups (one male group and one female group) that were facilitated once per week for 10 weeks in duration. Participants were provided with a written explanation of the research study as part of the informed consent process, which included a description of mindfulness. Furthermore, participation in the group was voluntary and many of the participants had expressed interest in attending in order to learn more about mindfulness and how it could be cultivated as a skill. Before attending the group sessions, many participants expressed having researched the

mindfulness online and shared a broad range of expectations of partaking in the research group, which reflected their understandings of mindfulness at the time. For example, two participants relayed a hope that the group may provide a means to explore their feelings. Alison (all names in this document are pseudonyms) suggested that she was looking forward to the experience because “it’s going to help me dealing with my feelings”, and Tara stated “It’ll be good so I can develop my own skills further with that [mindfulness]. If something comes up with my Mom, it’s like I can control myself a little bit more, and get through it better.” Similarly, Emma linked the concept of awareness with her expectations for participation: “It [mindfulness] might be good to help you understand other people and what they do.” Two other participants suggested that the group methods aligned with their personal goals and interests. As George suggested, his eagerness to participate in the group reflected his artistic pursuits: “When I first found out about this, we were talking about creative thinking and stuff like that, and that really hit me, ‘cause that’s something that I really like to do. Anything that has to use creative thinking, I’m all over it!” Lily added her hope that the group experience might positively assist her with her academic studies: “With all the school that I hopefully have ahead of me, it’ll be really useful for me to be able to focus on what I’m trying to do and not get distracted.”

Due to the small number of participants and specific catchment area of the study, it is difficult to describe in detail the participants’ experiences that pre-empted involvement in child protection and eventual foster care without revealing their identities. What can be said is that the participants represented a group of youth with wide ranging life experiences, challenges, unique interests, skills, and strengths. Many of the participants identified academic challenges such as maintaining their grades. Some of the youth also identified having had a history of interpersonal conflicts with adults in positions of authority such as previous teachers and social workers. In

some cases, this had meant some of the participants had previously missed a lot of time in the classroom (e.g., due to suspension or truancy). Establishing and maintaining trusting bonds with others was also an area that had or was currently presenting difficulty for some participants. As previously mentioned, however, the participants' experiences were diverse. For instance, while some openly discussed the impact of previous and current substance use, this subject was not relevant for others. In general, youths' experiences were similar to what is described in the literature regarding youth living in foster care (Cournty, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001). For example, each participant had come into contact with child protection services for issues such as parental neglect, caregiver mistreatment, parental incarceration, and/or parental drug use. This group of participants had also experienced a range of challenges since becoming involved in the child welfare system such as living instability as well as emotional challenges such as problems establishing trusting relationships with adults. Furthermore, consistent with the findings of Rauktis, Fusco, Cahalane, Bennett, and Reinhart (2011), some of the participants expressed frustration at the lack of anonymity in their community and school regarding their involvement in the child welfare system. At the same time, each participant conveyed a desire to participate in the group and an interest in learning new skills. The ages of the participants at the time of the last interview were 17 years (3 youth), 16 years (2 youth), and 15 years (3 youth). All of the participants were actively attending secondary school. Within the same school board district, three participants attended the same secondary school, three participants attended another secondary school, and two participants attended an alternate school site setting, which was affiliated with the same school board but offered classes with a lower student to the staff ratio and flexible hours of course delivery.

All participants were living in foster care at the time the group sessions occurred, however, the duration of placement in the current home ranged from several years to a few weeks. Among the participants, three had minimal contact with biological parents and seven were either living with or within close physical proximity (walking distance) to their biological siblings. In the case of two participants, the fostering family included biological family members. The group sessions were scheduled during school months in order to promote a consistent attendance record, and while most expected to attain employment during the summer months, three participants worked part-time while they took part in the groups. Amongst the group, there was diversity in the participants' interests and hobbies including horseback riding, BMX and mountain biking, and reading. A fully functioning youth centre in one of the communities served as a central meeting place for youth in Gibsons, while an after school drop-in centre served an equivalent purpose in Sechelt. To varying degrees, several of the youth in the study attended one of these venues on a regular basis. All of the youth who participated in the study presented with robust networks of peer and foster parent support, which is both encouraging (that they appeared to have support in their lives) and concerning because previous researchers have identified relatively high rates of social isolation among former youth in care once youth exit the system (Courtney & Heuring, 2005).

Early in the process, the male group experienced attrition with the voluntary withdrawal of two participants. No attrition was experienced in the female group. However, due to a part time job that began at the same time as the group sessions, one male could not attend the boy's group. Additionally, another male stopped attending the group after the second session. No reason was stated for the second male's attrition however I suspected that the second male may have ceased to attend because the remaining two males in the group were two years younger, and

he may have felt somewhat different and “the odd man out.” Upon follow-up, it was determined that the second male who dropped out had also begun part-time employment with incompatible hours. In general, I encountered difficulty in recruiting males for the study having received few referrals for male youth ages 15-19 years. Referrals of males aged 14 years and younger were declined due to age and older males appeared less interested in participating often citing employment commitments. The difficulty in recruiting participants with involvement in the child welfare system has been discussed by other researchers (Gonzalez, 2015; Jackson, Gabrielli, Tunno, & Hambrick, 2012) and will be taken up further in Chapter 6. The following section describes the theoretical underpinnings of an arts-based mindfulness group program with youth transitioning out of foster care.

Theoretical Underpinnings of an Arts-Based Mindfulness Group for Youth Transitioning Out of Foster Care

The group program I developed was created with a focus on experiential, arts-based methods, and facilitated using principles of strengths-based group work. The overarching goal of the program was to cultivate mindfulness so that youth participants could share their feelings, explore their perspectives, discover their abilities, and foster the development of their resilience. Based on their age, the strengths they displayed, the unique challenges they faced, and my experience in child and youth care practice, several key perspectives framed the development of the group sessions including (1) strength-based approaches in group work, (2) a broader social understanding of resilience, (3) a holistic understanding of mindfulness, (4) experiential learning, (5) and the use of arts-based methods with youth. What follows next is an explanation of these theoretical influences, which influenced the group goals and activities, and are described in detail in Appendix C.

Strength-based approaches in group work. Strength-based approaches focus on the innate strengths of individuals, families and communities rather than health, education and/or behavioural deficits (Antonovsky, 1987; Saleebey, 1999). Viewing an individual's resilience in relation to their social context is a process of looking broadly across the environment for assets that could potentiate personal strength. The inclusion of broader social structures in relation to one's strengths is important to an ecological understanding of resilience. Rather than focus on undesirable behaviours that may very well be adaptive, a strengths-based approach maintains a dogged concentration on inherent skills/strengths both in and around the individual.

In the dominant mainstream, the challenge for practitioners has been to hold a strengths-based approach in balance with the prevailing tendency to focus on risk. In support of this approach, Saleebey (1999) asserted that "it is as wrong to deny the possible as it is to deny the problem" (p. 15). In other words, strengths-based practice does not ignore problems but focuses on a person's strengths as a way to create change. Importantly, this often involves a shift in the mindset of the helping professional in a therapeutic relationship where one no longer asks what is wrong but rather what has happened, uncovering a wider context that includes solutions emanating from resources that at first may be more difficult to discern. Accordingly, previous researchers have highlighted how practitioners can regularly identify strengths in seven key areas including talents or athletic competencies; past coping; past thriving; future goal-setting; accumulation of personal and social resources; advice from others; and evidence of hidden talents (McCammon, 2012).

It is noteworthy that strengths related to these key areas develop within a climate of supportive relationships with researchers suggesting practitioners embed a focus on strengths in every interaction with young people (Rawana & Brownlee, 2009). For example, past coping and

thriving would be accentuated at times when we felt supported by others (Cameron et al., 2013). The same goes for athletic competencies that are more highly developed in the presence of a good coach, supportive teammates and families, and the positive experiences of play and competition (Côté, Hancock, Fischer, & Gurd, 2014). This is why a social understanding of resilience is inherently strengths-based.

Developing the group for youth transitioning out of foster care with a strengths-based approach is in keeping with the worldviews of social work and child and youth care practice (MacArthur, Rawana, & Brownlee, 2011; Saleebey, 2012). I was guided, for example, by the intrinsic worth of young people (Stuart, 2013) adopting key practice principles of strengths-based group work including decentralizing authority of decision-making, developing alliances with key members of the participants' lives outside of the group, and welcoming the whole person to the group (including their abilities and hidden talents perhaps not yet known or well-understood), not just aspects of the person deemed undesirable or challenging (Malekoff, 2014). For instance, the group design complemented participants' interests by including specific art-based methods that participants indicated they enjoyed doing in the first interviews. The style of facilitation we employed empowered group members by promoting their decision-making regarding the activities they wanted to repeat, and their food preferences. Another characteristic of this group with older youth was the degree to which decisions were determined by consensus (decentralizing authority). For example, with guidance outlining the benefits, participants elected to adopt a "clean air policy" free of any negative comments or put-downs, even in a joking manner. Their commitment to this idea was evidenced in the way they would hold each other accountable during the first two sessions before the bulk of those types of comments effectively disappeared. The group also included a well-integrated blend of verbal and non-verbal activities

to promote engagement with participants in ways that would be meaningful (complementing existing abilities/hidden strengths).

Moreover, in adopting a strength-based approach, there is an essential need for helping professionals to value participants' skills by incorporating their talents. This was accomplished by assisting participants to identify their abilities, and encouraging them to express these through the creative activities. In group sessions, we purposely repeated the activities that incorporated the participants' artistic talents (e.g., painting) and encouraged them to consider taking the artwork home to share with others. Specifically, I asked the participants to affix the artwork to fridge doors as a way to provide a conversational piece for discussion with their foster parents. The "fridge door experience" was a concept we discussed as a group, highlighting the importance of opportunities for young people to celebrate strengths and success, sadly lacking in many young people's lives who are involved in the child welfare system (Coholic, 2014). Next, I will expand on the influence of a strengths-based approach on the development of the group by discussing how a social understanding of resilience is inherently strengths-based, and how this understanding influenced the development of the group sessions.

Resilience. As described in Chapter One, I was interested in understanding how resilience was understood by youth transitioning out of foster care since the majority of research on resilience begins from an understanding of the concept that is not particularly meaningful to young people. In this study, resilience was conceptualized according to the work of Michael Ungar and colleagues who emphasized the social connections and relationships underlining an ecology of resilience that is determined by the processes of navigating towards health sustaining resources, and the negotiation that occurs between the individual, family and community to provide such assets (Ungar, 2008; Unger & Liebenberg, 2011). It was anticipated that this

understanding of resilience was likely more salient for youth transitioning out of foster care and thus became an integral foundation underpinning the current study.

For the purposes of developing a group for youth transitioning out of foster care, framing resilience in this manner meant that I made decisions about the structure, format, and timing of the group that would provide opportunities to form, extend, and ultimately strengthen social relationships. For example, I attempted to mobilize people involved in the lives of the participants including teachers, foster parents, biological parents, MCFD employees, peers, and siblings. This meant meeting with these people prior to the beginning of the group sessions to discuss the research, and inviting them to embrace the central concepts of the group so that participants would feel comfortable discussing the concepts outside of the group sessions. I attended MCFD employee meetings and traveled to the participants' homes to meet with foster parents and in some cases the participants' siblings. Additionally, in the absence of a network of good transportation in our rural area, I relied on foster parents and child care workers to meet the demands of participants attending the group.

A social understanding of resilience also reinforced the decision to implement group work so that participants would feel supported by their peers to explore and build individual strengths, contributing to a strong sense of belonging and emerging sense of self. Moreover, I thought that facilitating the group after school helped reduce vulnerability that past researchers identified as especially crucial. For example, Flannery, Williams and Vazsonyi (1999) noted that some youth in early adolescence first engaged in substance use after school during times with less parental supervision, leading to further participation in other risky behaviours as those youth aged.

I will now shift the attention towards the influence of understanding mindfulness as a holistic philosophy and practice. Mindfulness was described previously in Chapter Two. The purpose of recounting it here is to emphasize how approaching mindfulness as a holistic practice can be more helpful in engaging vulnerable youth populations. This is a point of considerable importance when considering the cultivation of mindfulness among youth transitioning out of foster care.

Mindfulness as a holistic practice. In general, the use of the term holistic referred to a decision to take into account the entirety of each participant's wellness: including their physical, psychological, social, and spiritual well-being. Employing a holistic approach meant that I was sensitive to the view that a person's health is influenced by their environment. This was deemed important to the way that mindfulness was approached with youth transitioning out of foster care since the experiences necessitating child welfare involvement typically affect the lives of these youth on many levels from an individual level (e.g., identity development) to a broader systems level (e.g., displacement from culture, sense of community belonging, spiritual influences). Put simply, a young person's existential questions in early adulthood related to identity, to culture, their sense of belonging, and spirituality are not likely to be answered if their well-being is only viewed as one-dimensional (e.g., physical health). Instead, a broader approach is required that acknowledges the connectedness between the mind, body, and spirit.

There is support for this position. In recently published research that outlined a holistic multi-model approach for young people combining yoga, psychoeducational resources and skill-building, homework practices, and art activities across eight group sessions, Boynton (2014) hypothesized that a "comprehensive and integrative approach might demonstrate better outcomes than singular evidence-based approaches" (p. 246). Likewise, Walker, Reese, Hughes and

Troskie (2010) have suggested combining a CBT approach with spirituality to improve efficacy. Moreover, in one Canadian survey, over half the youth respondents endorsed a spiritual dimension to their well-being (Spurr, Bally, Ogenchuk, & Walker, 2012) while American social workers endorsed the use of religion or spirituality as relevant in practice with youth (Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2009). Moreover, researchers have underlined the importance of revealing how mindfulness based interventions facilitate a “natural progression from the release of suffering t an individual level to larger scale transformation at the interpersonal and collective level” (Greenberg & Mitra, 2015, p. 75). Still, to date, few studies have approached mindfulness directly with youth as a holistic practice.

Coming from a holistic framework can mean that the process of learning mindfulness is less prescribed than a manualized cognitive-behavioural based approach that emphasizes specific clinical outcomes. Even now, as mindfulness has gained popularity in the mainstream, the majority of studies with young people focus on interventions that seek prescribed outcomes (Zack, Saekow, Kelly, & Radke, 2014). For example, in mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), the targeted symptom reduction outcomes in each session relate to the overarching goal of reducing depression relapse (Saltzman & Goldin, 2008). Similarly, acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) pursues psychological flexibility in order to enhance one’s ability to act according to values (Coyne, McHugh, & Martinez, 2011) Dialectical behavioural therapy does include mindfulness practice in some sessions, with the goal to enhance emotion regulation, distress tolerance and self-control (Linehan, 1993; MacPherson, Cheavens, & Fristad, 2013). The important point here is that I believed this particular group of youth were less likely to remain engaged in a helping process of learning mindfulness that did not resonate with their experiences

or was not flexible enough to know when/how to be meaningful and relevant to them. I will now explain what I did in the group to approach mindfulness as a holistic practice.

First, as indicated, I incorporated the participants' interests on a week-to-week basis without fear of being diverted from the group session's agenda. For example, participants would often relate the difficulty in applying key concepts of mindfulness in an argument with a foster parent. I would take the opportunity to solicit feedback from other members of the group to see if they also had encountered the same challenges and then query effective strategies among the group members for successfully incorporating mindfulness into the home environment and the relationship with their foster parents. With a more flexible approach, there is time to focus on the emerging strengths and changing needs of the participants.

Second, raising awareness that we have within us the tools and the potential to create positive change was presumed to be an empowering message for youth to hear. Thus, simplified explanations of these processes were adopted in group facilitation by teaching participants about different parts of the brain and their functional role related to stress, decision-making and interpersonal communication. I made a deliberate decision to discuss the neurobiology of practicing mindfulness, connecting the ideas of cultivating kinder, more accepting views of themselves and others with desired outcomes that participants reported such as reducing stress, improving their mood, and dealing with anger. I underlined how these outcomes relate to improved relationships with peers, foster parents, teachers, and social workers. In this way, I explicated connections between one's thoughts and feelings and a broader social context, hoping to demonstrate to participants their interconnectedness with peers, family, community and if meaningful for them, to a larger spiritual landscape.

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in exploring the neurobiological impact of mindfulness (Kass & Trantham, 2014) with much of the emerging literature supporting the use of mindfulness to manage stress and facilitate improved emotion regulation (Farb, Segal, & Anderson, 2012; Siegal, 2014; Temper, Segal, & Inzlicht, 2013). For example, in a recent review of multiple studies using brain imaging during meditation, it has been shown that the areas of the brain involved in impulse-control and the integration of memory, specifically prefrontal cortex and the hippocampus, are more active and can undergo structural changes when individuals are engaged in, or practice, meditation (Hazari & Sarkar, 2014).

As a result, I thought that participants in the current study might benefit from knowing more about the functional changes that occur in the brain and body while they are engaged in mindful practice, particularly in relation to helping these adolescents deal with their own stress while navigating challenges in school, at home, and in their communities. I assumed the participants would be interested in learning this knowledge and had the necessary cognitive/emotional maturity to grasp the concepts. For example, in one randomized study, researchers found those at high risk for relapse with substance use were better able to manage stress by having grasped the concept of acceptance in mindfulness, rather than relying on avoidance of known triggers (Brewer et al, 2009). Consequently, I was hopeful that participants grasp the concept of acceptance in mindfulness practice by exploring its connection to neurobiological processes such as the release of the stress hormone cortisol during a physiological reaction to fear, stress and/or anxiety. By learning about this process and the influence new mindfulness skills could have on reducing the effects of those emotions (through acceptance and deep breathing for example), I anticipated that they would feel empowered, and speculated that this may motivate the participants to continue practicing mindfulness. So, in the

introduction of most group sessions, I set out to discuss the emergent benefits of practicing mindfulness as a way to regulate neurotransmission and help deal with stress. I discussed that over time this practice had the potential to strengthen and “rewire” internal neural pathways that would in turn increase impulse-control and constructive decision-making.

Participants were encouraged in each group session to connect their participation in the activities to the specific sensory learning that was occurring and to visualize the complex processes occurring inside their bodies and brains. For example, during a mindful smelling exercise, participants were encouraged to consider their sense of smell as the primary way their bodies were experiencing the moment, and then making the connection to how their brains were interpreting the unfolding of experience. In each of the group sessions, participants were encouraged to share their experiences of mindful practice with each other. I would look for these types of teachable moments to connect the physiological benefits of mindful practices with improved personal emotion regulation to strengthen relationships with others, helping to promote a sense of empowerment deemed important by earlier researchers that underlined by these youth lack a personal sense of autonomy (Geenan & Powers, 2007).

In addition to promoting personal empowerment, it was anticipated that learning more about mind/body connections would also promote self-awareness, which underpins many processes of resilience earlier identified (Coholic, Eys, & Loughheed, 2012). Linking mindfulness to the processes occurring in the brain and body was enthusiastically received by participants as evidenced by the colourful discussions during “Mindfulness 101”, a short introduction of the group’s activities that included an explanation of the purpose behind each activity. These conversations would also take place during the primers when participants would share moments outside of the group that they had observed themselves to be more mindful (e.g., in an argument

with a family member and while facing academic stress). I cannot emphasize enough the importance of these youth, in particular, understanding the intention behind the activities in order to facilitate their engagement. As Burnett (2015) discussed about teaching mindfulness with teenagers in the classroom:

If we ask them to pay attention to the sensations in their little toes because they know that with practice, this will actually change the shape of their brains and make them happier and better at basketball, they might give it a go and forgo the giggling fit. (p. 44)

Third, I invited opportunities for participants to discuss/explore their identity in relation to a cultural and/or spiritual connection (or lack thereof). This was deemed holistic because it underlined a broader connection to individual health and well-being, and was more in line with culturally and spiritually safe practices of healing within child welfare (Raheim & Lu, 2014). As previously mentioned, this approach also connected deeply with mindfulness because participants could explore culture to augment their emerging sense of self-awareness and identity. For instance, two of the participants self-identified as Métis but expressed not knowing what that meant, and having little connection to biological family members, contributing to a lack of personal identity. We made room within the group sessions to explore these ideas by discussing the importance of Métis culture in our collective history as Canadians and opportunities within the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) that could further connect these youth with resources that would help them answer questions they were only beginning to ask. Likewise, I frequently emphasized our essential human need to develop supportive relationships with many peers and adults in our environment as a way to learn about new ideas and compensate for skills we have yet to develop; a concept understood as interdependence. In addition to underlining interdependence as a holistic concept of mindfulness,

this emphasis on our connection with others was congruent with the way resilience was understood in this study.

Arts-based methods and experiential learning. As previously discussed in Chapter One, in the current study, arts-based methods refer to the use of multiple creative and expressive mediums to teach mindfulness to youth transitioning out of foster care, facilitate their engagement in the group process, and assist participants to express themselves in meaningful ways. The use of arts-based methods was deemed appropriate in this research given its history within the helping professions, and its potentially transformative role in a healing process that can be simultaneously meaningful and empowering in the learning that may take place, yet non-threatening, allowing participants to control their own exploration of ideas. In the group sessions, I used a variety of arts-based methods to teach mindfulness, facilitate engagement and to assist participants with self-expression, which are described in detail in the next section.

Experiential learning focuses on the primary role that experience plays in all learning. Thus, the theory of experiential learning can be understood as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Kobl, 1984, p. 41). Experiential learning theory built upon the ideas of Dewey, Lewin and Piaget to present a model of learning illustrating a cycle whereby learners are constantly refining meaning-making through a process of experience, reflection, abstraction, and experimentation.

Much of my previous professional work used this model to shape programming and interventions with youth and adults from diverse backgrounds. Indeed, many of the activities that I have used in group work in various child and youth care practice situations, including these group sessions, were adapted from back-pocket games that I learned while working in a

residential summer camp programs and facilitating canoe trips that necessitated positive group cohesion to move safely through the wilderness. Experiential theory also aligns well with constructivism where “social knowledge is created and recreated in the personal knowledge of the learner” (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 194).

Utilizing experiential learning theory to teach mindfulness is appropriate since one of the central propositions of experiential learning is that it recognizes the “integrated functioning of the total person’s thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving” thus positioning itself as a holistic approach to learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2008, p. 4). Inherent in this understanding are other key tenants including how learning is considered a process, not an outcome. This meant I was constantly thinking about how best to engage participants since positive engagement with the group process would likely enhance their ability to grasp the concepts. The purpose of each activity was stated prior to its facilitation, and after its completion, and linked and reinforced to the concepts of mindfulness verbally and visually in order to communicate the information effectively to participants who learn in different ways. For example, visual anchors were often utilized as part of the teaching process. Before each group session, I would affix posters explaining concepts that had been discussed and developed early in the process to the walls where the group took place. This was also implemented in the way the group sessions would include opportunities for participants to build meaningful arts-based creations (e.g., thought jar, fridge magnet, seedlings in decorative cup) that were taken home thereby anchoring their experience in other settings. It was anticipated that this would remind them to transfer some of their learning from the group by thinking about mindfulness when they see the items outside of the group. Additionally, dialogue with key adults about the items that were placed in common areas at home helped reinforce the concepts. Overall, I attempted to create a culture of

engagement by promoting their autonomy and actively seeking feedback about the material, and how it was being presented.

Experiential learning also considers all learning as re-learning. This simply means that the process of learning is life-long, where ideas and beliefs are constantly tested and refined through experience. In the group sessions, participants shared their experiences of practicing mindfulness outside of the group, for example, breathing in class in order to attempt to calm themselves. When one participant shared this in the group, it acted as a springboard for another participant to discuss the role of mindfulness in trying to calm down after being upset by ‘drama’ related to her friends. In this way, the consistent sharing between participants allowed their ideas about mindfulness to become more sophisticated. The emphasis on the importance of learning from experience also fits well within mindfulness practice because both focus on paying attention and developing awareness through the unfolding of experience. As such, both experiential learning and mindfulness practice are processes that can help an individual generate new meaning/learning from experience.

Group Structure and Process

Unsurprisingly, several practical hurdles were experienced in the process of organizing the group sessions. These included: finding a suitable location, arranging appropriate transportation to and from the group site, and scheduling amidst competing factors such as familial commitments and part-time jobs. Negotiating these challenges required a collective will and collaborative approach from multiple stakeholders including agency staff, foster parents, school and research site officials, the researcher, and participants. Attending to the logistical considerations of facilitating a group with youth during after school hours was paramount. The group was held in a meeting hall adjacent to a church, frequently used by a range of community

groups, centrally located in the community, within short walking distance of public transit, the ministry building, recreation centre/skate park, and a secondary school. The size and amenities of the physical space was conducive to the facilitation of group activities that incorporated movement, art-based activities, and food preparation. I recognized the risks in choosing this site as a church hall could rightfully be perceived as a religious centre, and while I did not intend to suggest that mindfulness be decontextualized from spiritual roots, I was clear in explaining that mindfulness was not being presented as a religious practice or philosophy.

As outlined earlier, eight youth in total participated in two different groups. Each group was facilitated once per week for 10 weeks in duration. Group sessions were three hours in length and each group was co-facilitated on a weekly basis by a female social worker who was an MCFD employee and myself. The co-facilitator was not a case worker for any of the participants but she had direct knowledge of the child welfare system and had previous experience facilitating group work with youth. The researcher trained the co-facilitator in the group program/methods prior to its implementation by spending time teaching the activities, discussing mock group sessions and specifically reviewing each session's content. Additional related video in the form of a short film based on previous research, and scholarly journal articles were reviewed simultaneously by the researcher and facilitator to encourage open dialogue and questions about relevant group methods and processes. The MCFD was keen to be involved in this study as they received training in, and experience with, a new program.

In general, adolescents experience changes in essentially every aspect of their lives including the emergence of new cognitive and social functioning, physical and sexual maturity, patterns of relationships, and an emerging sense of self (Gestsdottir & Lerner, 2008). During this time, youth examine the values that shape the answers to overarching questions about identity

and the desired direction of an autonomous orientation in life (Malekoff, 2014). This shift toward increasing self-knowledge and independence was a factor in the design of the group sessions and the selection and facilitation of the activities, as was my expectations of the participants. For example, I assumed that the participants would have longer attention spans compared to younger children, and would be more willing to practice longer guided meditations and with more frequency. Group sessions were longer (three hours each) compared to my earlier experience facilitating arts-based mindfulness groups in which sessions were two hours in length. This allowed for sustained attention on activities, more opportunities to practice meditations, and a clearly defined break period in the middle of the session that included the provision of a customized healthy snack for each participant to help foster belonging in the group. The snack also enabled an opportunity for consistent mindful eating practice. Likewise, due to participants' ability to pay attention for longer periods of time and their thinking abilities, I provided a verbal summary at the beginning of each session relaying the session's main objectives and reaffirming the focal components of mindfulness philosophy and practice. The activities selected for the group were developmentally and age-appropriate with a specific onus placed on the participant to be responsible for implementing the activities outside of the group as they had the maturity to understand that they were the ones who stood to gain.

Each of the 10 group sessions were designed to follow a similar structure that would include a primer activity, first half activities, a break, second half activities, and a closing activity. Each session was designed to follow the same format so participants would feel comfortable knowing what the pattern of activities and objectives were. Additionally, repetition helped emphasize how important practice is to learning mindfulness. A concerted effort was made to replicate activities that extended the learning from a previous session, often with an

emphasis on group collaboration the second (or third) time an activity was facilitated. Both the consistency and the repetition between the groups created opportunities to put the concepts of mindfulness into practice. I will now describe in general the way each group session was facilitated.

At the beginning of each group session, a primer activity was used to engage the participants in a fun, group activity to enable the youth to acclimatize to the group setting/transition from the day's events, and foster a positive atmosphere for practicing/learning the mindfulness concepts. Primer activities were short (less than five minutes), fun, and inclusive. Essentially, a primer served as a warm-up activity, creating a more conducive environment for teaching/learning mindfulness and practicing more in-depth activities focused on mindfulness. However, primers were also included when I thought that the group needed to refocus their attention in preparation for a more in-depth mindfulness activity. Primer activities were designed to signal the beginning of the group in a way that was casual, gradual and inclusive. For example, I taught participants how to correctly deliver and receive a medicine ball. As they arrived at the program site for each session, they were invited by the facilitator to pass the ball back and forth. This activity was well-suited for this age group of participants for a number of reasons compared to facilitating activities with balls with younger children that in my experience have had a tendency to quickly unravel. First, older participants were physically strong enough to participate, and were actively engaged in mindful practice when safely passing the ball to one another. The proper stance for catching and throwing, and appropriate breathing techniques were practiced and promoted. A modified version of the activity invited participants to sit in a circle and roll the ball slowly to one another. In this way, the pattern of the ball and the sound of the ball rolling across the floor became the focus of participants' awareness. This

adaptation was in response to the participants who expressed their desire to sit rather than stand. Participants found that sitting felt more relaxed, and my co-facilitator was able to incorporate guidance around proper seating positioning for optimal deep breathing. Participants were encouraged to slow down their breathing, observe, and share their impressions of participating in the activity. Third, the primer was useful because it could begin with a single participant and continue until all members of the group had arrived. Naturally, during the activity, participants formed an inclusive circle, which created an ideal way for the facilitator to transition the group into the introduction of the activities.

After the primer, we facilitated a review of the agenda for the session and began the first half by reviewing some of the main concepts of mindfulness in a short discussion (approximately five minutes) entitled “Mindfulness: 101” as a way to establish the group format, review the concepts from the previous week, and extend this learning into the current session. In each of the 10 sessions, depending on the past week’s learning, and the participants’ general interest and attention span, I began Mindfulness 101 by reviewing some of the basic concepts associated with Kabat-Zinn’s definition before linking this understanding to broader more holistic ideas such as exploring cultural connection in relation to a their identity, and the development of self-awareness and acceptance to improve relationships (by way of emotion regulation) with peers, and other adults in their communities. During this review, I took the opportunity to explain introductory concepts such as paying attention, remaining non-judgmental, using ‘beginner’s mind’ and practicing being mindful as a way to develop patience. However, related to a holistic approach to mindfulness, I also emphasized broader concepts such as being kinder to themselves (self-compassion), and social connection and being ‘okay’ with asking/receiving help from others in certain areas of their lives (interdependence). It was anticipated that weekly reviews of

the main concepts of mindfulness and opportunities to discuss the previous weeks' learning would lead to a more comprehensive and practical understanding of mindfulness. The provision of a short oral summary of the main purpose of the session content and a detailed explanation lasting sometimes in excess of 10-minutes is not something that would be normally be attempted with younger vulnerable children. Providing effective instruction in this way also placed the responsibility of learning about and practicing the activities in the hands of those that would ultimately benefit (or not) from their implementation, which is consistent with the messages in mindfulness that encourage daily practice.

Overall, Mindfulness 101 was well-received as evidenced by the conversations that emerged during this part of each session. Participants were interested in both sharing their experiences about practicing mindfulness and the benefits of successes that they associated with their emerging practice. What followed next was one or two (depending on the length of each activity) arts-based activities that would use experiential learning to emphasize the concepts of mindfulness covered in introductory discussion. The approximate total duration of time for this part of the session was 45-50 minutes.

Next, we would pause for a nutrition break. As is the case in most groups, the provision of food was a major draw from the outset. This was especially true for this group given the timing between lunch and dinner when participants were hungry. I engaged a local Subway restaurant to cater the group sessions with sandwiches that could be customized to order the week prior. The intent of doing so was to underline the sense of belonging and ownership I hoped would galvanize amongst group participants. The objective was to foster a group environment that would be regarded as 'special' for each participant.

A defined break illustrated a clear demarcation point in the group sessions, which did not result in the subsequent loss of momentum in returning to activities that could sometimes be the case with younger children. The break also afforded the participants an opportunity to talk informally with one another and with the facilitators. At times, the break also provided a practice period for mindful eating, once that activity had been introduced. Group facilitators would discuss the concepts of mindfulness and apply them to mindful eating, providing examples using the different vegetables that could fall out of a sandwich and making connections to art-based activities and the concept of seeing a situation from a different perspective.

Following the break, participants engaged in a more traditional mindfulness meditation followed by an additional art-based activity, again emphasizing the concepts reviewed at the beginning of the session. Compared to younger children, the participants had little difficulty re-establishing their attention after the break on the activities in the second half of the session. Seated or laying down comfortably, participants were encouraged to listen as one of the facilitators either read aloud a guided meditation (Hooker & Fodor, 2008) or played a recorded meditation from an audio book (Williams, Teasdale, & Segal, 2007). An alternative to this meditation was having one of the facilitators lead the participants through a series of deep breathing exercises for approximately 10 minutes. In the second half of the session, with participants' attention focused again, participants engaged in another art activity, often facilitated in a collaborative nature, to explore participants' ideas about communication, promote democratic decision-making, and ultimately to foster empathy for each another.

The last art-based activity would then be followed by a formal closing to the session. Closings are debriefing activities that endeavoured to provide opportunities for participants to extend and transfer their learning to other environments by creating space for sharing, listening to others,

and personally reflecting on their recent experiential experiences (Kolb, 1984; Priest, Gass & Gillis, 2000). One such closing activity was titled “Closing with Rock” where a physical rock weighing in excess of two pounds was introduced to the participants in the first session. Participants were encouraged to hold the rock. Based on the colour and pattern, it was generally regarded as distinct and attractive, as far as rocks go. The activity itself involved participants passing the rock around to one another sharing one thing they had learned in the session or one thing they were appreciative for on that particular day. Holding the rock signified to others that that participant intended to speak and while the activity was in process other participants were encouraged to respect each other by listening to what the holder of the rock had to say. Closing activities were five minutes or less. However, due to the participants’ abilities and willingness to discuss their feelings and experiences, sometimes the closing activities were extended to accommodate the enhanced discussion that emanated from the experience of the activities and from practicing mindfulness.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred at four intervals over the span of seven months in order to explore the participants’ viewpoints and experiences at different points in time in relation to their involvement with the arts-based mindfulness group (see Table 2 below). Specifically, I was interested to trace the development of mindfulness, and their perceptions of resilience, before and after group participation.

Table 2.*Schedule of Data Collection*

Jan-Mar 2011	Apr-June 2011	June 2011	Sept 2011	May 2012
Pre-group referral interviews	10 week group program	Post-group interview	4 month follow-up interview	Group discussion & activities

The youth were individually interviewed (1) before the first group session began in order to assess their basic understanding of mindfulness and to explore what resilience meant to them, (2) upon completion of the last group session to assess their experiences in the group learning mindfulness and its impact on their resilience, and (3) four months after the completion of the group program to evaluate if and how they continued to utilize the mindfulness methods learned in the group program. The last and fourth point of data collection was a group discussion with the youth that was facilitated eight months after the groups had ended.

In order to promote safety of all involved, interviews occurred in the participants' homes or at a local youth drop-in center. Supervision was provided by a foster parent or child care worker but from a proximity that allowed participants to feel like they could freely share their personal views in confidence. Interviews were conducted by the researcher and were approximately one hour in length. All of the interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim for data analysis purposes. After each interview was transcribed, a copy of the interview was returned to the participants who were encouraged to review the transcripts for accuracy, and they were invited to make changes and provide further detail by way of notations on the transcript to ensure their views were properly transcribed or understood. Transcripts and

the opportunity to review them were provided to the participants prior to the next scheduled interview. This contributed to the rigour of the study by providing adequate time and space for participants to critically reflect on and adapt the answers they provided as a way to ensure the views they wished to put forth accurately reflected their experiences and viewpoints.

The follow-up group discussion was facilitated in May, 2012; approximately eight months after the last semi-structured individual interview had taken place. The purpose of the follow-up group discussion was to share and further refine the analysis with the participants. This also involved them in the research process in a more meaningful way. It was also an opportunity to learn if the participants continued to use mindfulness-based methods in their lives. All of the participants who attended the groups participated in the follow-up discussion, during which I recorded hand-written notes and collected specific feedback by way of interactive, experiential activities. In this way, the follow-up group discussion was organized in a similar manner to the group sessions. I facilitated creative activities designed to gather feedback about the perceived benefits of the group that were completed several months earlier. I also incorporated the art-work that the participants had created during the group sessions and more will be said about this inclusion in Chapter Five. The decision to include all of the participants in one follow-up group discussion related to the small number of males that took part in the original group and the perceived maturity of the female participants. Additionally, I anticipated an interesting opportunity (both from a researcher perspective and also for participants) to share experiences between the two groups.

The follow-up group discussion lasted two hours and included a viewing of a compilation of participants' artwork from the group sessions for the purposes of refreshing the participants' minds regarding the activities they participated in. Also included were a review of the research

questions and the interview guide, and an activity where participants placed three types of stickers beside a list of all the activities from the group sessions indicating the level of enjoyment, usefulness, and whether the activity had been memorable or not. In keeping with the format of the group sessions, a healthy lunch break was provided. After the lunch, the process of analysis including the initial coding, and the patterns of related codes, were described to participants and illustrated using a laptop and a projector.

Data Analysis

According to Maxwell and Miller (2008), one type of qualitative inquiry uses categorization as an approach to analyzing and explaining data whereby decisions made by the researcher lead to emergent themes. This type of inquiry has been referred to as thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006). With improved demarcation and widespread utilization due to accessible and flexible use in qualitative inquiry, thematic analysis has now become broadly acknowledged as a valuable method for “systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). The main reason thematic analysis is flexible is because it can be employed both inductively to generate knowledge and deductively to apply theory (to the data). How thematic analysis is utilized by the researcher signals certain epistemological considerations. As previously discussed, while it is normal for a researcher to share multiple worldviews along a continuum at various points in time in the research, engaging with a set of methods in a specific way helps to anchor the orientation of the researcher and provide consistency, clarity, and transparency. The goals (and questions) of this research study are exploratory given the aforementioned gaps in knowledge and therefore rest comfortably within the framework of qualitative inquiry,

employing an experiential, predominantly inductive form of thematic analysis, where, according to Braun and Clarke (2006):

The analytic process involves a progression from description, where the data have simply been organized to show patterns in semantic content, and summarized, to interpretation, where there is an attempt to theorize the significance of the patterns and their broader meanings and implication, often in relation to previous literature. (p. 84)

In order to address the research questions, this study used an inductive approach to thematic analysis, focusing on the semantic content of the data in the early stages of the analysis, searching for and analyzing themes, and later moving to a conceptual level of analysis due to specific convergences within the data that supported a more interpretive view of the entire data set. Each interview was analyzed in the order it was facilitated to enable observation of responses that changed from first interview to last. I used QSR NVivo 8 to code and manage the data.

Six general steps delineating the process of thematic analysis were used in an effort to promote methodological coherence (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Briefly, these steps included familiarizing myself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Before the analysis is described further, a short explanation of key terms is warranted. Codes and the process of coding refer to the organization of data into its most elemental state. Since analysis of the data in this study was an inductive process, coding was data-driven, where codes focused on the semantic feature of a single unit of meaning. This occurred through close reading of the transcribed interviews in line-by-line fashion until all of the interviews were coded in their entirety. By comparison, I used themes (and corresponding sub-themes where necessary) to house codes that I found demonstrated repeated patterns of meaning and netted “something

important about the data in relation to the research question” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Of course, there is the unavoidable impact that the researcher’s applied judgement and decision-making has on determining the constitution of themes. Themes did not emerge from the data but were arrived at in an active process undertaken by the researcher. While some of the research questions could be answered in a straightforward descriptive manner, the central research question required more abstraction focusing on the latent meaning of similarly grouped codes. What now follows is the process of analysis described in more detail.

The goal of the first step of analysis was to become immersed in the data and to begin to consider the coding process by observing and recognizing repeated patterns across the data set. First, each interview was transcribed verbatim and in an orthographic manner including pauses, laughter and emphasis of certain words in the interview transcript. The purpose of transcribing in this manner was to avoid “washing” the data and instead to allow for a closer and more accurate understanding of the interview as a whole. Transcribing the interviews in this way allowed for the essential nature of the original exchange to be “heard” through representative words on paper. Each transcribed interview was then re-read, and initial thoughts and observations were recorded in a journal. For example, I made a note linking sections of text with similar ideas supported in the existing literature, such as where the youth discussed wanting to handle their problems independently.

The second step of the analysis involved the initial coding process. While there is no single prescribed method for coding within thematic analysis, there are guidelines that one may follow based on some of the earlier decisions about conducting the analysis. For example, from an inductive stance, coding was data-driven therefore each transcript was read line by line and selections of text were determined to be codes based on their smallest elemental semantic

feature. New codes representing a single unit of meaning were compared to existing codes before being designated new labels. In this way, all interviews were coded in their entirety in a manner similar to that which is described as constant comparison (Butler-Kisber, 2010). Sometimes selections of text were coded more than once if the unit of data represented multiple meanings. For example, one participant commented that mindfulness meant “understanding what’s going on inside yourself and around you”, which was coded twice as “knowing your feelings” and “awareness to self in relation to others” in order to capture the idea of remaining vigilant beyond one’s self.

The third step of the analysis involved searching for themes across the data set. Initially, several related codes were organized into five broad categories: growing up well, challenges, health, awareness, and group participation. These groupings were given a name and observations about the relationships between the categories were noted. Preliminary thematic maps of each category were created for the purpose of collating, observing and organizing each code. At this time, the observed patterns between broad categories, including similarly related patterns of codes within the initial groupings were more closely examined. As a result, the initial categories evolved into four candidate themes with corresponding including: main challenges, conditions for wellness, understanding mindfulness, and helpfulness of activities. For each theme, preliminary rules of inclusion were created, essentially beginning to define the story that each theme would eventually tell in relation to the research questions by describing the theme’s boundaries (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Butler-Kisber, 2010). Here it is important to point out that naming and defining themes are not mentioned in the guidelines for interpretive thematic analysis until the latter stages. However, as was previously mentioned, thematic analysis is not a

linear process and acts of what fundamentally boil down to writing the report begin well before the end stage.

The fourth step of the analysis included a thorough review and further refinement of the candidate themes and sub-themes. For this step, every code within each subtheme was reviewed closely to determine the correct “fit” to ensure internal coherence. Specifically, codes were reviewed to ensure the content displayed the shared meaning of that sub-theme. This process resulted in further refinement. For example, in the case of one key theme that described the participants’ understandings of mindfulness, two corresponding sub-themes related to self-awareness (“open-mindedness” and “observing one’s own thoughts and associated feelings”) were collapsed into a single sub-theme with a preliminary name (“non-judgmental self-awareness”) and a more appropriate rule for inclusion that specified:

Non-judgmental self-awareness: refers to participants discussing openness towards thinking and feeling without criticism, by way of the senses, and observing inner reactions to circumstances as they unfold.

The second type of refinement at this step involved examining each theme for coherence across the entire data set. This form of quality checking included a final re-reading of the data set and decision-making surrounding whether the candidate themes and sub-themes “capture the most important and relevant elements of the data, and the overall tone of the data, in relation to your research question” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 66). In addition to re-reading the data set, earlier draft thematic maps were revisited to ensure all components of the candidate themes had been included and not left out of the analysis. This was the phase of analysis where the follow-up group discussion material, including feedback from the participants about the usefulness, most enjoyable, and most memorable activities, was compared to the interview data as a way to

provide further insight about the helpfulness of the group experience and of specific activities. The main ideas including the importance of practicing the activities, collaborating with others, and using humour helped to affirm similar themes within the analysis.

The fifth step of the analysis included defining and naming each theme, which began after the draft themes had undergone another iteration of development (collapsing and reorganization) to render two main themes with associated sub-themes including participants' challenges of system-involvement and their perceptions of resilience, and participants' understanding of mindfulness and the benefits of learning to be mindful. Several research projects were reviewed at this stage as a means of comparing the process of developing key themes (Frith & Gleeson, 2004; Moola, 2012; Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004). This exercise helped to trace the overall story within each theme, including how the participants' perspectives regarding resilience and mindfulness changed following group participation. It is also important to highlight the guidance provided by my academic supervisor with whom I reviewed, clarified, and refined the development of these themes. Reviewing my interpretation of the analysis with my supervisor led to a process of continual refinement whereby the intended meaning of the participants' perspectives in the interview data were closely examined and discussed.

Next, a detailed analysis of each theme was written. This was accomplished in two parts: explaining the content of each theme, and describing its place and role amidst the other themes to showcase the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Individual codes were again reviewed and representative portions of text that amplified the points within the analysis were selected. Extracts of text were chosen that embodied the nature of the position being presented with a focus on including the most colourful and/or subtle examples (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Working titles for themes and sub-themes were replaced, when appropriate, with names that included

words used by the participants in an effort to bring the raw viewpoints of transition-aged youth to the forefront of the presentation of results.

Last, the sixth step of the analysis involved the final write-up. The strategic component of this stage was in reviewing the analytic narrative of each theme individually and as a whole, and revising and rewriting accordingly to ensure that, where appropriate to do so, the analysis had gone past description to a level of interpretation to present a substantial and convincing argument. Another useful lens to gauge success at this step included reviewing the analysis with my academic supervisor looking for the utility and function of the main idea underpinning each theme (Butler-Kisber, 2010; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The findings that resulted from the analysis described above are presented in the following chapter. However, to conclude this chapter, I will present criteria regarding the concept of rigour so that readers can appropriately gauge the trustworthiness of the findings that follow.

Rigour

Overall, trustworthiness and rigour offer the mechanisms for researchers to demonstrate the value of research outside the boundaries of quantitative parameters (Given & Saumure, 2008). Trustworthiness and rigour have been defined as “the means by which we demonstrate integrity and competence, a way of demonstrating the legitimacy of the research process” (Tobin & Begley, 2004, p. 390).

According to Goldberg and Allen (2015) “transparency is fundamental to the demonstration of rigor” (p. 11). Throughout this research, I have attempted to remain as transparent as possible so that my degree of rigour can be accurately evaluated. Accordingly, there are three sections in this chapter that are very important. First, I included a reflexive

summary to make my own approach in this research visible. Second, in the previous section, I explicated the specific steps of the analysis including how the process of coding took place and how my judgements about these codes led to emergent themes from the interview data. Third, I am including criteria developed by Butler-Kisber (2010) to further assist readers to assess the trustworthiness of this study. According to Butler-Kisber trustworthiness includes:

- [1] whether the researcher has developed an intimate familiarity with the topic or context;
- [2] whether there is sufficient field text [data] material to merit the claims of the work;
- [3] whether it is apparent the researcher has made systematic comparisons between and across categories; [4] whether the categories contain field text [data] material that has been constructed over a wide range of observations or over several interviews; [5] whether there is clear and logical evidence that links field texts [data] with interpretations; and [6] whether there is sufficient evidence to convince the reader of the research claims. (p. 46)

First, before I developed the group program I had a strong background working with vulnerable children and youth and with recent experience in the development and facilitation of arts-based mindfulness methods. Additionally, I was embedded as a practicing child and youth worker in the schools and communities where the research took place. In general, it was my past training and experiences working with children and youth that largely shaped my desire to facilitate a research process with youth transitioning out of foster care. It was learning from these experiences that led me to approach this research process with the hope of fostering meaningful relationships with all stakeholders (beginning, principally, with the participants). In working with people, I have come to know that it is in large part these relationships that predicate success or inertia in any endeavor. Essentially, I shared with MCFD employees, foster parents, and the

eventual participants that I believed a holistic approach represented a promising practice among this population of young people who were typically difficult for helping professionals to engage. It was my hope that this research would provide an opportunity for the participants to develop skills and benefit from a positive group experience. I hoped that this contribution might bring more attention to the need for continued research among this population, and the feasibility of holistic approaches and group work.

In short, the process I described above relates to authenticity. In qualitative research, authenticity, a component of rigour, refers to the process undertaken by the researcher to consider the impact of the research on participants, and the potential impact that the research may have on society as a whole (James, 2008). Returning now to Butler-Kisber's (2010) criteria: in order to ensure meaningful results could be rendered, I sought to construct a large enough "pool" of data to conduct the analysis. Interview data was collected from each participant at three points in relation to the group experience: prior to, after, and four months following the group sessions. Third, as described in detail earlier in this chapter, the process of data analysis included a rigorous comparison between and across emergent themes and (fourth) drew from a "deep" pool of data. Fifth, in the two chapters that follow, I attempt to describe the logical flow of ideas between the raw data and its interpretation as research findings to (sixth) effectively convey the resulting claims.

Finally, my stance is in harmony with other researchers who have suggested that issues of trustworthiness be considered continuously in an iterative process rather than as a procedural step or as a desirable outcome (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olsen, & Spiers, 2002). One of the means of operationalizing a process of continual evaluation is to implement actions that make transparent the rationale of the researcher's decision-making (Morse et al., 2002). This study

included an audit trail (Rodgers & Cowles, 1993) consisting of detailed notes on the parts (data, analysis, findings) and structure (relationship between the parts) of the data analysis that provided a path to review how decisions in the analysis were made (Wolf, 2003). Several discussions with key colleagues and mentors (from my experience as a master's student, and also as a child and youth care worker) also assisted the decision-making process. Member checking was also utilized (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007) by returning transcribed data to the participants prior to successive interviews, so that they were provided an opportunity to add/omit/edit dialogue to most accurately represent themselves in the data collection process. While none of the participants chose to adapt the transcribed interviews, explaining the intention behind this step to participants helped decentralize the power I held as the researcher and promoted the participants' autonomy. Indeed, participants appeared satisfied in receiving printed hardcopies of the interview data and this made its purpose worthwhile nonetheless.

The follow-up group discussion was also a form of member checking where the discussion activities provided an avenue for participants to share their feedback. The preliminary stages of the analysis were shared with participants, in an effort to demonstrate how their ideas within the interviews were informing the development of themes about the research. While the participants did not provide critical feedback at this opportunity, I can say with confidence that the experience promoted their autonomy and helped demonstrate the importance of their role. At the time of the follow-up group discussion, I remember feeling proud of their engagement and happy that they were interested in knowing more about the research. As I was discussing the analysis of the data using codes from the interviews, I observed that the participants were attuned to the presentation. For example, they were watching with interest and nodding their heads at times when I was checking for understanding but also when I was not. They genuinely seemed

interested in learning about the direction of the data analysis. I could not help but reflect on the idea that it may be their absence from care-planning meetings that later stifles engagement in clinical interventions. Yet, here were a group of youth willing to attend and engage in a meeting that considered many of the same emergent themes that would be discussed among clinicians. Experiencing this positive engagement with these youth helped underline the idea that care-planning processes in the various systems where these youth are typically involved (e.g. child welfare, mental health, criminal justice) may not be as client-centred as they could be.

Practitioners: take heed!

Summary

In this chapter, I explained the research process including the study's epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, research questions, and method. The step-by-step process of the data collection and analysis were also described. Reflecting qualitative inquiry and utilizing three semi-structured interviews with each participant, and a follow-up group discussion with supplementary activities, I explored the links between learning mindfulness and developing resilience with youth transitioning out of foster care using an inductive form of interpretive thematic analysis. A lack of understanding from the viewpoints of youth transitioning out of foster care about their perceptions of resilience and understanding of mindfulness, and the lack of research exploring MBIs with vulnerable youth, necessitated an exploratory approach to the current study. Additionally, the suitability and feasibility of an MBI for youth transitioning out of foster care had yet to be determined. I further explained how this study was one of the first examples of approaching mindfulness directly with youth as a holistic practice.

The interpretive thematic analysis yielded key themes related to the perspectives that youth transitioning out of foster care shared by way of meaningful participation in semi-

structured interviews and a follow-up group discussion. In the next two chapters, I present and discuss these findings and discuss their relevance. In Chapter Four, I focus on participants' perceptions of the challenges that they have endured within the child welfare system and while transitioning out of foster care. I also explicate the key features of resilience as reported by the participants. This discussion addresses the research questions that asked how these youth understood resilience. It also helps address the potential connections between mindfulness and resilience. In Chapter Five, I explain the participants' understanding of mindfulness before and after the group sessions, and describe the benefits of learning mindfulness, and the perceived helpfulness of the group experience. This discussion addresses the research questions that focused on understanding the youths' experience of participating in an arts-based mindfulness program, and of learning mindfulness. In the final chapter, Chapter Six, I consider how all of the research questions have been addressed, including the central question that focused on the suitability, feasibility, and benefits of an arts-based mindfulness intervention for youth transitioning out of foster care. Additionally, I describe the limitations of the current study, and provide suggestions for areas of future research.

Chapter Four

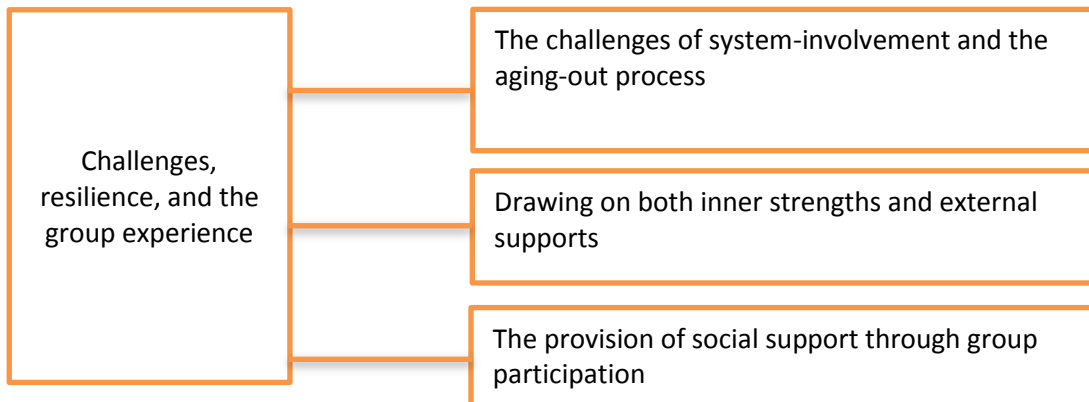
Resilience During the Aging-Out Process:

The Complexities of “Being Strong” and Seeking Support

The research process described in Chapter Three outlined how a thematic analysis enabled an in-depth examination of the participants’ semi-structured interviews. This discussion will be presented in the following two chapters. This chapter examines the first category of themes related to “Challenges, Resilience and the Group Experience.” The themes within this category describe the challenges related to involvement in the child welfare system and aging-out of foster care, and explore what resilience meant to the participants, and what they identified as necessary for its development. As previously highlighted, it was important to hear their viewpoints to better understand the unique circumstances that underlined their transition from foster care to adulthood, and to determine how the participants conceptualized resilience throughout this research process. Thus, in this chapter, the convergences between their perceptions of resilience and their experience of group participation are also discussed (see Figure 2 for an overview of these major themes).

Figure 2.

Participants’ Challenges, Resilience, and the Group Experience.



The Challenges of System-Involvement and Aging-Out

In order to appreciate the unique challenges facing youth transitioning out of foster care, it was important to establish a developmental picture of the challenges facing youth not involved with the child welfare system. For all youth, adolescence, coarsely outlined as the second decade of one's life, brings about a constellation of cognitive, physical, physiological and emotional changes (Malekoff, 2014). Historically, the period from childhood to adulthood was marked by special responsibilities particularly in an agricultural economic base. Adolescents would (and still do in some settings) carry specific responsibilities under the supervision of adults (Schlegel & Barry, 1991). However, adolescents can become segregated from useful roles without a functional purpose under appropriate supervision. There is broad agreement about the developmental tasks of adolescence including forging independence from family, developing a healthy sexual identity, preparing for future familial and vocational roles, and testing morals and ethical frameworks through decision-making (Malekoff, 2014). At the same time as adolescents experience increased independence and decision-making, they develop stronger bonds with peers, and may pull away from primary caregivers as their own developing sense of self emerges. However, Rogoff (2003) has also pointed to the contextual nature of the normative burdens of adolescence since roles, responsibilities, and challenges for youth during that period of time shift from place to place. This is an important point to consider given that the study of resilience has been defined and dominated by the cultural norms and biases of the Western mainstream (Ungar, 2008).

In his recent book examining the teenage brain, Siegal (2014) discussed how the need for strong, safe and secure relationships does not end after the early years of a child's life. The integration of a developing identity with secure relationships during adolescence can provide the

foundation for creative innovation and complex problem-solving. In the tension between the tighter-knit family dynamic and expanding horizons of peer association during adolescence, youth are increasingly exposed to social pressures. More dramatic changes in the brain occur at this time, increasing its susceptibility to external factors of influence. An increase in risk-taking activities at this time can have a profound impact on the development of (un)helpful behaviours (Steinberg, 2008), particularly among those who have faced childhood adversity (Anda, Butchart, Felitti, & Brown, 2010).

Siegel (2014) proposed that one of the keys to better supporting teenagers is increased presence and understanding in relationships, which can be fostered in part by mindfulness. Mindfulness meditation can help a person feel more secure about themselves, mediating a secure attachment with one's identity, buffering the impact of trauma and disorganized attachment, and promoting relational well-being with others. This happens in part because meditation can strengthen the physical circuitry of the brain, enhancing emotional self-regulation, thereby insulating youth from some of the risks associated with this transformative stage of life. A recent review of mindfulness-based programmes promoted the continued implementation and study of such interventions based on promising findings (Tan, 2015). For example, one study helped confirm the positive impact of mindfulness on emotion regulation as adolescent participants citing lowered levels of perceived stress, psychosomatic complaints, and higher levels of efficacy in affective regulation after participation in a mindfulness-based school program (Metz et al., 2013).

Upon preliminary analysis, some of the challenges that the participants in my study disclosed did not appear divergent to the expected burdens of teenaged youth not living in foster care. For example, all participants described a range of difficulties such as living with siblings,

experiencing “drama” in peer relationships, and negative exposure to non-prescription drug use. However, consistent with the literature in this area, participants also described challenges unique to becoming involved with the child welfare system and growing up in foster care, focusing on the period of transition when young people are no longer eligible for support from the child welfare system due to their age. These challenges included being exposed to traumatic events and circumstances of loss that children from healthy functioning families would not have to deal with such as separation from biological family members, living with roles/expectations inappropriate for their age, and participating in the dual roles of being cared for by the government and caring for others. Participants also talked about incidences of feeling judged by others, mounting academic pressure in relation to the age that they would no longer qualify for services under the Ministry of Child and Family Development (MCFD), and instability in their foster home placements.

All of these challenges reinforced the idea that these young adults, prior to aging-out of the child welfare system, were grappling with a unique set of circumstances compared to youth not living in foster care. It appeared that the challenges of system-involvement and aging-out of foster care reflected a critical period of managing increased responsibilities and stressors with fewer supports. The characteristics of these participants’ experiences are now examined in closer detail. While there is overlap amongst the challenges described below (for example, the issue of trust), I have attempted to delineate the participants’ main ideas.

Parentification. Previous researchers have documented how older siblings, in the absence of appropriate parenting, can assume caring roles for siblings, leading to a process of parentification (Conger, Stocker & McGuire, 2009). Parentification has been defined as “a type of role reversal, boundary distortion, and inverted hierarchy between parents and other family

members in which adolescents assume developmentally inappropriate levels of responsibility in the family of origin” (Hooper, Doehler, Jankowski, & Tomek, 2012, p. 164). According to Hooper (2011), parentification can be categorized by the physical tasks (instrumental parentification) that children and adolescents complete within the family such as paying bills, shopping, and attending to siblings’ well-being, and their emotional roles (emotional parentification) as healer and secret keeper for other family members. The existing research base points to fewer negative outcomes associated with instrumental parentification rather than the more deleterious effects of emotional parentification (Hooper, 2011).

In the current study, participants described experiences consistent with parentification such as caring for siblings to compensate for poor parenting. This experience was articulated by Tara as she cautioned that teenagers who grew up looking after younger siblings could “either live too far on the teen side or too far on being a parent.” Tara was reflecting on a continuum of teen experience that involved occupying multiple roles. Accordingly, she appeared to understand that living at the extremes of this continuum should be avoided. Emma also highlighted these feelings as she explained that she “grew up having to basically live as part of a parent for myself because I didn’t have them” and admittedly now worried too much about the well-being of others: “A lot of friends always say you’re like a mother to everyone else.” Also expressing the experience of caring for others was Beth, who described having grown up “mothering my brother and sister.” These participants’ observations about their experiences of parentification help affirm a common reality of youth involved with the child welfare system, and these young people are aware that their experiences are different than their peers. In another example, having missed curfew, Beth recounted that a care provider had affirmed the importance of experiencing more normative adolescent roles than she had been used to before coming into care:

Ever since I've got into care I've always been told start acting your age. And I have. I was late on curfew 'cause I was up at a party one night. It's like well you told me to act like a kid. I wasn't keeping track of time. Yes, I was drinking. I'm not going to lie.

The description of being told to "start acting" her age characterizes some of the complexities parentified youth live with.

It is important to consider that the experience of caring for others, in particular, is typical of instrumental parentification and may be an adaptive solution to challenging family dynamics, although the issue of parentification is admittedly complex. For instance, some researchers suggested that adolescents engaged in roles typically ascribed to adults could be a normal part of healthy development contributing to positive identity development and personal competency (McMahon & Luthar, 2007). These latter characteristics are positive factors akin to those evidenced in the development of resilience (Ungar, 2008). Indeed, as evidenced by the meaning Beth had ascribed to her situation, experiencing dual roles appeared to foster a positive self-image: "Sure it was a bad situation, but I also thank her for that bad situation because I kinda like how I grew up so fast. Nobody thinks of me as 17. They all think of me as 18 or 19 because I don't act like a child." However these responsibilities can also produce negative effects (losing the opportunity to be children themselves) should they go unrecognized or extend indeterminately (Hooper, 2011). Importantly, Champion et al. (2009) pointed out that the roles ascribed to parentified youth such as increased responsibility of caring for others and decreased supervision mean it is harder to attain normative markers such as scholastic achievement.

As a result of this complexity, researchers have emphasized the need for child welfare workers to carefully examine the well-being of each parentified child before making decisions in care planning since it is acceptable in many cultures for siblings to take up a central caregiving role

(Elgar & Head, 1999). The important distinction to draw is between youth ascribed these responsibilities within a supportive familial framework and those forced into positions of responsibility because of situations involving abuse or neglect. In highlighting an area of possible future research, few studies have examined the more contextual and cultural elements of parentification to explore possible positive outcomes in resilient populations.

Effects of separation from biological family members. All of the participants had been separated from their biological parents, and in some cases, their siblings. Previously, researchers have described the impact of biological separation from parents including recurring combinations of feelings such as sadness, anger and ambivalence. In younger children, the corresponding emotional connection with the parent may fade faster than in comparison to an adolescent who carries more cognitive and emotional coping skills and remains connected to the parent, for example, through social media. Regardless of age, researchers agree that youth are likely to blame themselves for the separation at some point; a scenario that can have serious consequences if left unchallenged (Feiring, Simon, & Cleland, 2009). The tendency to self-blame can lead to further internal (e.g., depression) and external (e.g., aggression) deterioration (Fosco & Grych, 2008). Furthermore, Penninck (2013) interviewed foster care alumni and found that the associated stigma from internalized feelings of shame related to being in foster care negatively affected these individuals' ability to foster meaningful connections with others, and that this lasted into adulthood. By the time youth age out of foster care, many have developed mistrust for others (Unrau, Seita, & Putney, 2008) and/or expect to be let down by other people, negatively impacting the development of healthy adult relationships (Singer, Berzin, & Hokanson, 2013). This lack of trust is a common characteristic found in youth in care due in some cases to past relationship upheaval and loss (Schofield & Beek, 2009), a desire to be less

vulnerable to anticipated future letdown and loss, (Munson, Smalling, Spencer, Scott, & Tracey, 2010), and/or because of the practical difficulties of jumping through logistical hurdles (for child welfare workers), such as ensuring peers and peers' parents have criminal reference checks as was the case in the present study.

Feelings of self-blame were quite evident amongst the participants in the current study. For example, one participant blamed herself for being placed in foster care: "I don't want to say that it's my fault that I came here but I'm the one who kind of gave the ministry the information they needed to put us here." Likewise, Tara reflected that she had been very critical of herself in the role of care provider: "you can be really negative to yourself a lot, because you can make a mistake and punish yourself." These comments underlined the reality that youth will assume personal responsibility for decisions that demanded a response from child welfare authorities. According to Garber (2010), the experience of loss as a result of this separation changes over time from "initial shock to a painful crescendo and then falling back to a dull ache that for some may never disappear" (p. 144). Yet this process varies by circumstance, and according to a child's cognitive, social and emotional development. According to attachment theorists, the separation between parent/child matters far more to the long-term well-being of the child than the rationale prompting departure (Bowlby, 1973). Perhaps then, understandably, participants who were taken into care at a young age spoke less of this disconnection having either been too young to remember the event or having since accepted the occurrence. However, for two of the participants taken into care in early adolescence, the topic of separation from biological family members was important for them to speak about, signaling that they were likely still processing and trying to make sense of this loss. For example, Tara acknowledged how difficult it was not living with her mother, and openly described a sense of loss:

For me growing up right now it's being separated from my mom and not really having that daily activity with her kind of thing. You know, you come home from school and it's like you tell them how your day is, you eat dinner. You know, you maybe spend family time once a week or whatever. You know I come home and I hope maybe she's online or I can call her. It's a big part of my life that I have never really had. . . . You know a lot of girls, they go shopping. It's like you go shopping with your Mom. You'll look for a dress for the grad with your Mom and I don't really have that, and when I want to talk to her when something happens, I can't really just call her 'cause I have to wait until she calls me or send her a letter and wait two weeks for her to send one back.

Tara acknowledged that her experience was different than many of her peers and mourned key milestones.

Separation from biological family members also included being separated from siblings. This was the case for Beth who had been placed in a different foster home because she was much older than two younger siblings. In the current study, participants included one set of siblings living in the same home and another set of siblings living apart. Conger, Stocker and McGuire (2009) found that a tightly woven sibling bond could become a "critical source of resiliency" (p. 51), which has influenced child welfare workers to place siblings together in foster homes when possible. Moreover, a review of placement separation concluded that siblings placed together fared better than those who were placed apart (Hegar, 2005). In spite of this existing knowledge, disconnection from biological family members is a prevalent issue among older children in care with a Canadian study reporting that of 150 families with multiple siblings in care, 58%

experienced separation, despite the fact that these researchers also underlined the importance of closeness and connection with family members (Herrick & Piccus, 2005). Moreover, older youth are far less likely to desire or experience adoption (Farris-Manning & Zandstra, 2003). This unsettling fact was also evidenced in the current study as Beth wrestled with the reality of her siblings being adopted and relocated farther away:

Everyone's asking me, where's your brother? And I'm like, ah, he's gone. I'm not really sure how I'm getting through it. I'm struggling, who wouldn't? . . . You took advantage of that. You didn't see them because they were so close. Now they're gone.

Beth's comment resonates loudly as an older sibling now acknowledging (maybe for the first time) a strong sense of regret, personal loss, and isolation due to the separation from her brother.

Impermanence of foster homes and living situations. The impermanence of living situations was another important issue described by many participants as a reality that exacerbated the normal challenges of adolescence. Ian described earlier moves rather nonchalantly and chose not to dwell on the subject beyond stating that he had moved between a "bunch of different homes and stuff". In contrast, other participants made no effort to hide their displeasure with this experience. Emma, having recently moved into a new home mere weeks prior to this interview, stated: "I don't really like it in the house." In general, moving at this stage of their lives was described as a struggle, especially when youth were moved away from established peer networks. This experience was revealed in an account from Tara, who expressed feeling isolated from peer relationships: "It's mainly about being away from my friends. Living

here is just being so far away from what I called home.” Similarly, Alison described that leaving behind former foster parents and family had been especially difficult:

For some reason the move has been so much harder than I thought it’d be. Yeah, I thought it would be so easy and it’s not. I thought I wouldn’t care anymore but that’s not the case. I care a lot. It’s being away from the people I’ve lived with for years. And my brother who I’ve lived with my whole life.

For Alison, placement instability disrupted her relationship with former foster parents and led to eventual separation from her brother. This experience is consistent with findings from researchers who identified placement instability as a risk factor for youth transitioning out of foster care because of how it negatively impacts their sense of connections with others (Stott & Gustavsson, 2010). Feeling disconnected based on having to experience multiple moves may create friction with caregivers in new foster home settings and can contribute to increased difficulty forming trusting relationships outside the home (Geenan & Powers, 2007).

In the current study, several participants expressed that they experienced these difficulties. Shelly, for example, stated that she spent considerable energy “figuring out who you can trust.” Similarly, Lily explained that she self-monitored her social relationships, particularly with people she acknowledged feeling uncomfortable around: “you have to know how far you’ll be willing to take a relationship with someone that you’re uncomfortable with.” These participants described a perpetual process of having to initiate new relationships in a way that was strikingly guarded. As explained by Alison, there was a level of risk associated with opening up to others: “You need to know the right people to talk to about stuff. ‘Cause there’s some things you can’t tell some people. It’s just, risky.” In general, these findings help support the

findings of previous researchers that pointed to a greater sense of emotional stability in youth who were made to endure fewer moves (Stott, 2012).

Specific to the context of smaller and/or rural communities, the reality of living in a rural area means that decision-makers sometimes have fewer options for appropriate placements, underlining the practical importance of extended kinship (Berrick, 1998). For example, a less than ideal placement in a rural area had consequences for Emma because not having access to a vehicle in an area with poor public transportation posed a barrier to achieving part-time employment: “there would have to be someone that picks me up or take the bus and then meets me somewhere and then picks me up again.” Moreover, in reaction to an impending move which she perceived as a risk to finishing secondary school in the school she had become accustomed to, Beth decided to forgo contracted assistance from MCFD and live independently without a youth agreement prior to her 18th birthday. In effect, she ran away from foster care stating “I had to kind of do it all on my own [live independently] and that was a big challenge for me.” Despite the reported need for appropriate foster care homes in rural areas (Restino, Nov 8, 2013), little else is known about how living in a rural area may exacerbate the issue of housing impermanency, though one might logically conclude from the views of the participants that fewer placement options for youth transitioning out of foster care in rural areas leave child welfare providers with less suitable placement options to consider.

Academic pressures. As one would expect, at the time of the study, all participants were receiving a formal secondary school education through one of three area high schools or the alternative school program site. Most of the participants were attending regularly except for one participant who was admittedly absent from class most of the time. While progressing toward graduation, participants collectively described mounting academic pressure. For Tara, this was

related to her goals of pursuing post-secondary studies: “my goal is to get really good grades this year and next year and then get into UBC [University of British Columbia]”. Likewise, in response to questions intended to assess participants’ current challenges, George stated his desire to “try and pass school.” Similarly, academic pressures were reinforced by Beth who emphasised her “need to work on [school] things.”

Pressure to do well in school was self-imposed for some but also arose in communication that the participants had with ministry-employed social workers and with foster parents. The reality facing youth transitioning out of foster care is that financial support stops at age 19 years. Accordingly, there was a sense of urgency communicated by Beth, who was positioned to be first among the participants to age from the child welfare system: “you have to maintain your grades”, underlining the pressure related to agreements signed with the MCFD that guarantee funding for housing and tuition conditional on maintaining satisfactory academic status:

Everyone has been asking me, like, what are you going to do when you grow up? (. . .)

The social worker doesn’t want you to have to hurry up and get all of those credits you are missing. They want you to try and do that in grade 11 so you graduate on time.

Youth agreements mean that a youth can receive financial support for housing and school by the MCFD up until they turn 19 years old or in rare cases beyond their 19th birthday provided they are working, attending school on a full-time basis, and demonstrate an ability to live independently while addressing or having no issues related to non-prescription drug use or mental illness (Laura Honey, personal communication, 15 January 2014). Alison also articulated this sense of urgency regarding her academic standing: “I need to get my act together” while George echoed this sentiment by stating, “There’s a lot more pressure on you to do well” adding

that “everything starts counting” and “if you don’t [do well] you’re set back a year in your graduation.”

In these comments, participants acknowledged both an awareness of the stress of academic pressure and its relatedness to future-oriented well-being. A review of earlier studies informed by youth transitioning out of foster care yielded some convergences with these ideas about school. First, a study by Del Quest, Fullerton, Geenan and Powers (2012) highlighted how the experience of education during the transition from foster care can be a source of fear based on the uncertainty of not knowing how one will succeed in the future without supports. A participant in that study expressed: “I am just like on my tiptoes with everything. Like, I don’t know what I am going to do after high school” (p. 1608). Similarly, respondents in another study highlighted how the need to manage other more urgent aspects of their independent living plans (appropriate housing, economic stability) prevented them from focusing on their future education (Höjer & Sjöblom, 2014). However, despite not having the support to simultaneously attend to school matters, participants in another study understood the importance of education as a “platform for a better life” (Höjer & Johansson, 2013, p. 32). Thus, the concept of academic success informed how youth envisioned achieving a good future, although it is not always attained during the transition period.

In summary, although feeling academic pressure is an experience many youth go through at this age, there appeared to be additional pressure on the participants because of the awareness that there is unlikely to be a financial safety-net (otherwise available in many families) if they are unable to successfully meet the needs of their ministry agreements. Accordingly, the perspectives of participants on the subject of academic pressure supported the finding of a unique burden of stress for youth transitioning out of foster care.

Experiences of marginalization. Lastly, participants reported feeling judged by others. Participants perceived comments made by care providers, such as: “you don’t want to turn out like your mother”, as judgemental. The likelihood that these subtle messages can reinforce stereotyping of youth in foster care is high. Shelly further alluded to her perception of the negative label of being in foster care: “Around here [community] we’re deemed not really that great.” This sense of being negatively viewed could also be reinforced through interactions with MCFD staff. Beth provided an account that underlined her struggle to reconcile the demands of her social worker: “I hate some of the things that he [social worker] says, like every mother of my friends has to get a criminal record check. I hate that. And I hate asking for that.” Similarly, experiencing a lack of confidentiality in a small rural school and corresponding community exacerbated the experience of marginalization. According to Shelly, repeated visits to the school by child welfare officials led to a feeling that little of her personal life was private: “everybody knows what happens when something bad happens. Like whether you want them to or not, it generally gets out there.” These experiences relate to the realities of living in a rural area and are reflective of life in smaller communities in general. For instance, Shoveller, Johnson, Prkachin, and Patrick (2007) previously studied the impact of rurality on youth identity, and found that youth similarly experienced a loss of personal control, particularly in relation to the role of personal decision-making. These researchers recounted instances of doctors “putting girls on” (p. 833) birth control rather than having an informed discussion with a health care provider about sexuality and their bodies.

In summary, the participants in this study experienced serious difficulties that were congruent with other findings in the research literature, suggesting that children living in foster care experience challenges that other youth living outside of the child welfare system do not.

Despite these challenges, beginning in the pre-group interviews, I listened as participants conveyed a sense of optimism about their futures. For example, Emma aptly summarized her experience growing up in the child welfare system by drawing an analogy of an automobile wreck:

Some people are, I would say, have been like, had a trauma, like a car crash. So they're afraid to ride in cars but the rest of them is totally fine. But sometimes like traumas can make you not want to do stuff your brain doesn't want to. I would have to say your brain doesn't want to re-live through that: Your brain and your body. You have more complicated stuff to go through your life but you're still normal and like everyone else. . . . Problems and stuff, they're fixable.

This analogy was important in the sense of Emma's ability to compartmentalize her past experiences, articulating that although a person's past trauma may result in deficits they remain fundamentally whole and capable of moving forward. Although she acknowledged that she can be restricted in some ways, Emma maintained a future-oriented outlook: "I'm determined to be successful and I like to prove people wrong." Likewise, this optimistic outlook was expressed in an account from George, who described that for:

three years of my life I was in a hospital 'cause of my real parents doing drugs. I was extremely sick and I'm just glad I could carry on with my life. . . . When I get out of high school, I'm trying to get into Emily Carr [post-secondary institution].

This sense of optimism led me to consider how the participants understood and conceptualized the notion of resilience; that despite adversity, participants considered themselves "normal" and anticipated attainment of future-oriented success. This is in keeping with a strengths-based perspective in practice that values the competencies demonstrated by youth in the midst of

significant adversity as building blocks towards improved futures. While the adult outcomes for abused children are less encouraging than those not affected by maltreatment (Merksy & Topitzes, 2010), previous researchers have also demonstrated that youth involved with the child welfare system can experience positive outcomes over time (Fernandez, 2009). For example, a secure sense of one's cultural identity has been linked with reduced behavioural difficulties (Filbert & Flynn, 2010). Additionally, the assertive pursuit of educational supports, strengths-based assessment, and treatment of mental health problems has contributed to higher educational achievement (Pecora, 2012). Furthermore, I was interested to see whether their experience in the research process had influenced their understanding of resilience. Next, I discuss the factors that youth in the current study identified as supporting their ability to do well in the face of adversity.

Drawing on Both Inner Strengths and External Supports

In keeping with an exploratory approach to understanding resilience from the perspectives of youth transitioning out of foster care (a group that has been underrepresented in the research literature when it comes to defining resilience), participants were asked broad questions about the challenging situations they faced, and of their actions and thoughts in response to those challenges. As was explained in the previous chapter, the interview guide was informed in part by previous research with groups of youth living alongside mainstream society yet sharing few of the same privileges (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2011). Thus, it was anticipated that using the same questions as a starting point would be both a sound methodological decision in creating scholarly space for this population who have been widely researched from an outcomes perspective, yet seldom directly heard from. Beginning in the pre-group interviews, participants' descriptions formed three main ideas: "going with the flow", being "strong", and experiencing

social support, which informed their understanding of the necessary tools to endure the challenges outlined earlier in this chapter.

Going with the flow. As the following comments support, some participants described “going with the flow” and leaving matters to “fate” as a way to handle adversity, and make sense of their past experiences in order to move forward with their lives. In the pre-group interview, George relayed his willingness to accept his relocation to a new foster home; “I just kinda went with the flow and got used to it.” Similarly, prior to the group experience, Ian explained that rather than fight decisions in his life, he focused on making decidedly positive actions: “if you do different actions, like if you do something good, then it’ll be like, you know, come back, kinda like karma. But if you do something good, the outcome will be even better. If you do something bad, there’ll be something bad.”

I found that this idea continued to be relevant for some participants after the group had ended. This was apparent when Tara speculated how she was likely to handle difficult adversity: “if things get really bad it’s just kind of like, the back-up is always go with the flow. Cause can’t fight a river but you can at least try to flow with it and navigate it in a sense.” Moreover, Emma sounded resolved to the idea of learning from previous events but largely accepting that many decisions were largely outside of her control:

You can learn from them [previous events]. Sometimes, there’s also fate, like, if it’s meant to happen, it’ll happen and if it’s not meant to happen it won’t.... It [how I react to adversity] depends. Some things I just throw over my shoulder; it doesn’t matter. Some things really, really do matter....I would say with certain decisions and stuff like if it’s the weather you can’t change it no matter what. If there was a tsunami you wouldn’t be

able to change it or fix it or go past it. It'll happen no matter what. But if you are like into drugs or like a bum and you can't seem to get money, you can change them.

“Going with the flow” is interesting in that it reveals a way that these youth expressed resilience in adopting a mindset that allowed them to persevere despite knowing they may continue to experience powerlessness since many key decisions are not in their control (Bruskas, 2008). A lack of autonomy can be debilitating in the sense that powerlessness can translate to feelings of hopelessness, and influence rates of suicide, to name one example (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998). Previous researchers have also evidenced similar viewpoints. For example, one participant in Geenen and Power's (2007) study of youth involved in the child welfare system summarized, “tomorrow is another problem, so I just live for today” (p. 1099). These authors suggested that this viewpoint reflected the way youth adapted to the feeling of being let down by focusing on one day at a time. Though this viewpoint is distinct from mindful awareness, it is akin to the concept of living in the moment, which is certainly conducive to learning more about mindfulness. On one hand, “going with the flow” may mean that youth have become accustomed to being let down, and have given up trying to determine a path of their choosing amidst adversity. Conversely, “going with the flow” signalled that some youth with experience in the child welfare system may more easily adopt key concepts of mindfulness practice that focus on the experience of the present moment, rather than a preoccupation with thinking about the past or future. In the current study, the state of mind to go with the flow can be viewed as a preliminary step towards mindfulness, perhaps helping to explain in part why this specific group of youth were eager to participate in the group.

Being strong. The second major viewpoint about resilience was the participants' emphasis on personal strength. Pre-group interviews revealed that participants felt they needed to

be strong when facing challenges, and how strength was something to be valued. Most participants characterized themselves as strong and those that did not expressed a desire to be stronger because of the view that others they considered successful, in spite of adversity, were regarded as “strong and capable.” Indeed, the idea of strength dominated the participants’ ideas about resilience throughout pre and post-group interviews and more will be said about this later.

The concept of strength did not equate to physical fortitude but rather characterized a mental and emotional hardiness, and a determination to achieve something in life despite what had happened. Comments about strength were closely related to the importance participants also placed on individual self-reliance and on their desire to become more independent. For instance, with respect to self-reliance, Beth described strength as “the ability to go through life with courage” and this was equated by Alison with decisions not to “give up.” As a result of their life paths, identity formation for many of these youth was expressed by a fierce sense of self-determination. Emma explained that she felt slighted by others and was principally motivated to “prove people wrong.” Likewise, referring to the determination required to endure the multiple setbacks she had experienced since coming into foster care, Lily indicated that in order to grow up well “you have to be strong enough to take it all.” Moreover, Tara described a cumulative process of building her identity where: “you kind of build-up who you are and now that stuff [past events] doesn’t hurt you.”

Participants also discussed the idea that strength could be acquired by learning from past experiences. Beth described herself as “stronger because of my past, if they see what I’ve had to deal with. That’s also made me stronger. That’s made me who I am.” This was akin to Tara’s reflection that direct experience was an excellent source for learning: “There’s no better way to learn to overcome a situation or a bad situation, any situation, than to experience it.” Since these

participants saw themselves as already having experienced so much in their lives, they confidently identified as being capable of enduring difficult circumstances:

You can change which way you're going; You're not stuck. . . . It takes a lot of confidence and hope even if something isn't right; to get through that kind of stuff and still be able to say, okay, I want this when I'm that old. You know, I want to be there, regardless of where I am here.

In another example, Shelly was asked what being strong meant, to which she replied: "be yourself; don't try to follow what other people do or say. Do what you think you want to do." This idea of strength was conveyed as a source of pride for Beth who, in relation to the recent experiences of being separated from her brother, stated that "right now, it [what I am most proud of] would have to be being so strong". Similarly, Shelly relayed that, in relation to the past: "I'm pretty proud of myself in general, because I have gotten in there and dealt with crap." This was also emphasized by Tara in her acknowledgement of the past: "I'm glad and proud that I am still here." These responses were akin to what Samuels and Pryce (2008) labelled "survivor pride", describing statements from youth aging-out of foster care that endorsed the importance of feeling self-reliant and having accomplished success on their own (p. 1206).

Further support for the importance of strength was evidenced by how participants regarded their emerging independence, meaning their ability to experience more freedom, be financially self-sufficient, and solve problems on their own. George relayed that strength meant "being able to get through things on your own when you can," which provided evidence for a link between the concept of strength and this participant's sense of emerging independence. For George, growing up and becoming an adult was about fulfilling personal objectives related to "taking care of yourself, getting a job and finding a place", as well as furthering post-secondary

goals: “I’m going to try and get really good grades because I want to get into university.” Other participants, like Emma, also viewed receiving an academic education as an important step toward independence and achieving life goals: “You need education to get a job. Without a job, you can’t pay rent!”

Based on a small collection of studies that have sought to better understand the viewpoints of older youth in foster care, the concept of strength as described by participants in the current study was similar to findings from existing research (Cunningham & Divesi, 2012; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). For example, Samuels and Pryce coined the term “survivalist self-reliance” to describe the importance youth transitioning out of foster care placed on being “strong.” Cunningham and Diversi (2012) also noted that foster youth expressed “high levels of self-reliance” (p. 600). Similarly, in the current study, many participants emphasized the importance of independently handling one’s own problems. For example, Ian stated that he purposefully avoids asking for assistance: “some of the challenges that I can, like personal challenges, I can keep to myself.” Lily also expressed the importance of self-reliance: “You can’t let them [peers] solve it [problems] for you.” In relation to how she solves problems, Emma also articulated a sense of personal responsibility for decision-making: “if you follow, you’ll obviously go down the wrong route.” Tara affirmed that the task of overcoming challenges is to “look at a situation, choose how they want it to be, and then make it happen.”

The idea that one must solve their own problems was common among participants, and in line with attachment theorists who have posited that children who do not develop secure attachments learn they must rely on themselves (Cassidy, 2008). In response to similar sentiments, Cunningham and Diversi (2012) and Samuels and Pryce (2008) concluded that helping approaches that emphasize independent living skills in recognition of adult status at age

18 years, negatively impact the likelihood that these youth will reach out to others for emotional support. I know that the participants were eligible for, and encouraged to pursue, this type of assistance (Independent Living Skills) through the MCFD. Perhaps participants are simply reflecting the idea of personal strength inherent within those programs. The past experience of disconnection including biological separation and placement instability (highlighted earlier) further illuminate why these youth may have experienced difficulty forming trusting relationships and felt they should rely primarily on themselves.

Utilizing support from others. In balance with a strong sense of self-reliance, participants in the current study also acknowledged (in pre- and post-group interviews) the importance of supportive relationships to their understanding of resilience. According to Lily, a decision to “incorporate other people” in the process of navigating challenges was regarded as important because of an uncertainty as to how present feelings might impact a capacity to manage difficult situations: “sometimes I don’t always know how I’m feeling.” Similarly, Shelly suggested that in the midst of turmoil “you need to talk to someone.” Tara suggested that other young people in similar situations would be better served by sharing their feelings: “let people know what’s going on inside of you or else you’re gonna fall behind” while Ian affirmed support for this idea saying it was important to “communicate a lot and talk and just talk about your feelings as much as you can.” It was revealing to note that in each instance participants described talking about their feelings, rather than asking for advice, for example, and that these comments, in particular, were made after the post-group interviews. This was encouraging given that most participants had expressed difficulties in forming trusting relationships, and articulated the need to broaden effective coping strategies related to dealing with uncomfortable emotions.

Participants in the current study reported many important relationships in discussion about their “support systems” consisting of biological family members, friends, foster parents, and helping professionals such as doctors and counsellors. The identification of support system membership is akin to related concepts from emerging research regarding youth transitioning out of foster care such and the importance of social support (Blakeslee, 2015; Geenan & Powers, 2007; Hiles, Moss, Wright, & Dallos, 2013; Singer, Berzin, & Hokanson, 2013). For example, Singer, Berzin and Hokanson (2013) identified the term “relational networks” (p. 2110) to describe the often complex web of support involved with young people in the child welfare system, including helping professionals, family members, and peers. In the current study, participants identified similar categories of support.

First, family members such as siblings often received attention because siblings remained in close physical proximity and had been through a similar experience as the participants. For example, Ian stated that “she’s [his sister] going through some of the same stuff so we can interact and talk about our challenges.” Three participants also highlighted the re-emergence of their relationship with their biological mothers since coming into care. Shelly reflectively acknowledged that, on balance, coming into care was a positive step for everyone involved:

it is best [coming into care]. My mom has done so much better. I can’t say I’m so happy I’m in care, like I’d love to be with my mom, but I have a closer relationship now that I’m not living with her.”

Second, foster parents and helping professionals were regarded as important. Beth focused on the role of a counselor in her life recounting an earlier conversation with another participant:

We were having a big conversation last night because [co-participant] doesn't like counselors and I had a really good experience with them because they don't judge you. They give you advice but they're not saying you need to do it this way.

They're saying you can do it this way.

Beth also valued her relationship with her foster parent because the foster parent had skills and knowledge that Beth could gain from. Moreover, Beth had grown comfortable having spent more than a year living there: "Maintaining my relationship with [foster parent] is important because I talk to her and I'm comfortable with it. I can tell her anything." Beth's descriptions of the nature and quality of her relationships with these two non-kin adults echoed the trust and respect identified in helpful mentoring relationships between youth exiting care and youth service professionals (Munson, Smaling, Spencer, Scott Jr., & Tracy, 2010). Nurturing supportive connections, such as the ones that Beth described, are critical since researchers have connected the development of stable social relationships with successful transitions to adulthood (Geenan & Powers, 2007; Stott & Gustavsson, 2010). One concept related to the way Beth described this connection is "relational permanence", which is described as the experience of a sense of belonging through "life-long, parent-like connections" (Semanchin Jones, & LaLiberte, 2013, p. 509). This has received attention as researchers implore care planners to pay attention to the viewpoints of youth who, like Beth, have underlined the importance of long-term social connections for youth in foster care (Samuels, 2009). While I support their efforts to implement a reliable measure that will provide helping professionals with continuous feedback regarding a vulnerable population's sense of social connection, it would seem that placement stability is another important dimension of relational permanence. The reality of the experience of living in foster care, as evidenced by the challenge of placement impermanence identified earlier in the

chapter, often means youth living in foster care are not afforded the ability to maintain relational permanence. Indeed, when asked what factors (of resilience) she felt were most important to overcoming barriers in her life, Beth stated “being in a stable environment, great surroundings” and later added that “my biggest fear of moving down here was losing contact with my friends.”

Another concept related to this discussion is “social network analysis”, which researchers are beginning to study to better understand the interconnectedness between support system members and to predict better transition outcomes (Blakeslee, 2015). One of the concepts informing this “social network analysis” is network cohesion, which refers to the connectedness between support system members, taking into account whether or not connections between support persons exist, and the degree of strength in these relationships (Blakeslee, 2015). For example, in this study, I observed strong communication between foster parents, social workers and other helping professionals, working cooperatively to facilitate the youths’ participation in the group sessions. In a rural context, this involved preparing for appropriate transportation in the absence of available public transit, and raising their personal and collective awareness of the skills and experiences the youth were being exposed to in order to help the youth transfer their learning to home/classroom environments. More research is required to understand what is a good degree of network cohesion within the relational networks of youth transitioning out of foster care, but this concept helps to broaden our awareness of the importance of who youth identify as supportive and the connections between these people.

The third and final support system that many participants discussed was their friends, which is reflective of the developmental stage where adolescents begin to spend more time alone and with peers than with their parents or guardians (Malekoff, 2014; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Lily stated that “most of my issues are my family” so talking to friends was viewed as necessary

to avoid further upsetting family: “I don’t usually talk to my family [about difficult situations], so I talk to my friends about it.” According to Lily, she could be authentic with her friends and “just relax around [them] and be yourself.” Emma reinforced this view describing her friends as more accepting: “people who support me and my own beliefs.”

In total, six participants focused on friends being their most important support system and this was an idea the participants consistently expressed across pre and post-group interviews. Some have suggested that due to earlier losses and/or absences of important figures in their lives the role of peers is especially important for youth transitioning out of foster care, more so than for youth not involved with the child welfare system, and that the heightened importance of friends to these youth has the potential for both positive and negative impacts on long-term health outcomes (Shook, Vaughn, Litschge, Kolivoski, & Schelbe, 2009). For example, it is widely accepted that all youth with established peer networks do better in many developmental areas than those left isolated from peer support (Güroğlu, van Lieshout, Haselager, & Scholte, 2007). Yet, young people are also susceptible to the influence of their friends. For youth involved in the child welfare system, one concern involves how spending time with peers who have led disrupted lives with fewer supports and are more likely to exhibit deviant behaviour, can negatively affect group decision-making. Shook et al (2009, p.290) found that “youth tend to make connections with similar inclined youth”. This was supported by Tara who explained that her peer group consisted of people who had a difficult time fitting in: “we’re all different. It’s like if you don’t fit anywhere else, you fit here.”

So how did participants in the current study balance this issue of being strong and maintaining their self-reliance, while simultaneously seeking out support? As the following comments support, most participants were aware of this delicate balance. For example,

comments from Lily further contextualize the sense of hesitation in relying too much on others: “if you want to talk to someone about it, that’s cool but you don’t want to have a bunch of other people trying to deal with your problems.” Similarly, Tara explained that it was important to her to avoid excessive sharing of information with someone else, perhaps for fear of losing control of the situation or being judged by others: “you can confide in someone else but you don’t want to make your problems their problems.” This finding was consistent with results from Samuels and Pryce (2008), who found that youth valued support from others but were reluctant to receive that support if they felt they sacrificed their sense of self-reliance in the process. Ian reported that his idea of successful people were those that were “able to take care of themselves and learn on their own, and they’re able to find other people who can help them.” Lily fused the apparent tension between asserting individual decision-making with asking for support by suggesting that without others “it’s harder to be strong.” Similarly, Beth affirmed that cooking and budgeting skills (known as independent living skills) are “not really that independent because you need help along the way.” In this way, internal strength and supportive relationships may best be considered complementary to one another when external support from others does not interfere with one’s internal sense of self-reliance.

The idea that participants’ beliefs about strength and support are both important for resilience coincides with a growing body of research that has sought to resolve the tension between the concepts by promoting interdependence rather than self-sufficiency as a way to support social connection for youth and a strong sense of belonging (Rauktis, Kerman, & Phillips, 2013). This is also in keeping with the idea that youth in foster care grow up amid a larger cultural context that reinforces the value of “independent living skills” (Propp, Ortega, & NewHeart, 2003). Indeed, as Einstein noted, the belief that humans exist as separate from one

another was nothing more than “an optical delusion of consciousness” (as quoted in Calaprice, 2005, p. 4), emphasizing how the importance placed on independence has long overshadowed our need as human beings to be connected with others. Certainly, the high regard for independence in Western societies has led to widespread isolation and alienation of those that perceive themselves as inadequate when they are unable to fix themselves (Emmons & Kranz, 2006). This is also illustrated in how collectively we show a disdain for dependence, for instance, in the way we pity seniors when they cannot take care of their basic needs. Helping to confirm this idea, researchers emphasizing the toxic effect of social isolation have recently confirmed that “the biological fact remains that we are fundamentally a social species, and our nature is to recognize, interact, and form relationships with conspecifics” (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014, p. 58).

Researchers are now calling for interventions for youth transitioning out of foster care that carefully consider youths’ perspectives and customizes approaches that promote autonomy, and engages a broad support system to help youth gradually take on adult roles amidst empowering relationships (Rauktis, Kerman, & Phillips, 2013). For example, Geenan and Powers (2007) recommended that disjointed efforts to provide services for these youth be merged in a single point of access that would provide a mandate for one helping professional to work across multiple funding sources in areas such as housing, health, and education, to build customized holistic plans of care that reinforce autonomy. Interestingly, the same argument from a community perspective was made by Chandler and Lalonde (1998) who articulated that communities in control of factors related to their personal and cultural autonomy fared better in reducing rates of suicide. As Ungar (2013) importantly warned, resilience has too often been

reduced on an individual basis to the demonstrated abilities to cope rather than more broadly examined in relation to the helping interventions and systemic factors that have been involved. Thus, the fact that youth in the present study identified the need to strike a balance between solving problems on their own while also endorsing a need for social support, helps to reaffirm the need to shift the direction of policy and programs from emphasizing purely independent living skills to the social and relational needs of individuals (Blakeslee, 2015; 2012; Rauktis, Kerman, & Phillips, 2013). In this manner, youth could be more appropriately supported with a multidisciplinary customized intervention plan that addressed individual needs. This would satisfy calls for more targeted interventions in service provision (Contenta, Monsebraaten & Rankin, 2014; Fisher, Chamberlain, Leve, 2009; Goemans, van Geel, & Vedder, 2015; Ungar, 2013).

In summary, the analysis of interviews revealed three categories contributing to how participants conceptualized resilience including going with the flow, being strong, and having support. These ideas were expressed evenly before and after group participation, perhaps reflecting some of the values inherent to the programs available to youth that further reinforce mainstream ideas of what it means to be “successful.” The next section will focus on how the group experience was perceived by the participants as a source of social support important to their understanding of resilience.

The Provision of Social Support Through Group Participation

The arts-based mindfulness group was experienced as a source of social support that felt inclusive, safe, and fun. The discussion that follows helps to address one of the supplementary research questions: What are the youths’ experiences of participating in an arts-based mindfulness program?

The benefits of group work, particularly with vulnerable youth in care, are well understood (Malekoff, 2014). Previous researchers highlighted the importance (to youth) of being close to their peers, of meeting new friends facing similar circumstances, and the experience of having fun (Coholic, Lebreton, & Lougheed, 2009; Ingley-Cook & Dobel-Ober, 2013). Indeed, in the current study, it was with these advantages in mind that the group was conceived. Participants' responses to queries regarding their overall experience of the group generated thoughtful insights that affirmed the group as being a meaningful source of social support and mutual aid. This mirrors similar results of emerging research exploring the purposeful use of an arts-based approach among vulnerable children involved in child welfare or mental health systems (Coholic, Oystnick, Posteraro, & Lougheed, in press).

Social support can be broadly understood as emotional (love, empathy, trust), informational (providing advice), appraisal (feedback), and practical support (tangible resources) that is produced as a by-product of relationships with others, developing over time, and leaving lasting impressions that influence future connections (Antonucci, Fiori, Birditt, Jackney, 2010; Hiles, Moss, Wright, & Dallos, 2013). As a concept, social support links to attachment theorists, who have underlined the early influence of the caregiver relationship in developing one's expectations of future relationships (Bowlby, 1973). Similarly, mutual aid has been extolled as a best practice within social work practice with groups (Steinberg, 2010). Its principles of developing collaborative supportive relationships, identifying and developing strengths, and working together toward individual and collective goals have been regarded as central to the group work experience (Hyde, 2013).

Based on four types of social support (emotional, instrumental, informational and appraisal), Gordon (2011) delineated five providers of social support for youth with trauma

backgrounds including parents, relatives, other adults, peers, and siblings. For youth transitioning out of foster care, it was rightly anticipated that participants would have experienced disruption in social support to many or even all of these different providers. Yet, the provision of social support during the transition out of foster care can serve as an important protective factor (Perry, 2006). Thus, it was promising to see the way that participants described their group experience as having offered social support through the positive relationships with peers and the facilitators in the group. This was evidenced through the emotional (empathy), and appraisal support (feedback for self-appraisal) participants shared with one another, and affirmed by the facilitators through continuous encouragement during the group sessions. Additionally, instrumental (practical), and informational (advice) support was provided by the facilitator working for the MCFD when solicited by the participants. Analysis of the interviews revealed three categories supporting the provision of emotional and appraisal social support: inclusivity, feeling safe, and having fun.

Inclusivity. To begin, several participants' responses indicated that they felt included in the group. One of the benefits of group work for people from marginalized populations is that traumatic experiences become normalized in a safe setting. This is important because of two related points underlined by youth leaving care (Provincial Advocate for Children & Youth, 2012). First, youth in care can often feel isolated and marginalized. Second, feeling part of a "strong and proud community of youth in and from care" (p. 31) was articulated by these youth as a goal to eliminate these experiences of isolation. Thus, it is encouraging that the groups in the current study supported this desire to be connected with others. For example, Alison reflected on her experience of the group as "amazing" and continued by explaining "I mean if they weren't the right people then it wouldn't have been the same. Kind of like a family. We all went in

together.” Shelly reported that the interpersonal sharing between participants led to her own process of personal reflection: “made me actually think about stuff.” Similarly, Lily explained her sense of relief in being able to listen and share experiences with peers she felt understood by:

It was nice to have other people to talk to about that kind of stuff because you know at school you don’t just like talk about it with anyone. So, it was nice there. It was nice to have other people to talk about it who get it [the experience of being in foster care].

These comments illustrate that participants trusted one another and felt comfortable among their peers to be authentic. In contrast to the experiences of marginalization relayed by participants, Emma described feeling accepted in the group: “I didn’t feel like I was being judged.” This finding is relevant to the idea of social support because outside of formal helping relationships such as traditional therapy, which many youth in care resist entering into, there are few opportunities for youth transitioning out of foster care to talk about their experiences, despite calls for asset-based approaches within child welfare (Coholic, Fraser, Robinson, & Loughheed, 2012). Moreover, as was established earlier in this chapter, youth in foster care often have a difficult time forming trusting relationships. Participants’ comments suggested they experienced a sense of connection with one another that fostered strong relationships between group members and group cohesion as a whole, two factors that can potentiate the experience of resilience (Ungar, 2008; 2013). The reciprocity of these relationships was evidenced in the group where the environment was created to safely share participants’ experiences and where all feelings were normalized. Alison highlighted how the experience of the group helped foster a strong relationship with an MCFD staff member: “I’ll probably remember you and Laura, how I used to

talk to Laura about my problems, which was...I don't know if it was wrong 'cause she wasn't there to be a therapist but it felt okay."

What is important to emphasize is the group facilitation that encouraged meaningful conversations about participants' experiences of marginalization and fostered these conversations as a way for participants to better understand and cope with their experiences, ultimately providing a sense of empowerment central to effective service intervention (Ungar, Liebenberg, Dudding, Armstrong, & van de Vijver, 2013). These feelings of inclusion described above were closely related to the idea and experience of safety.

Feeling safe. Some of the participants expressed feeling a sense of safety and comfort while attending the group sessions. For instance, Shelly described worrying less reflecting that the group "was a good place just to kind of go and relax and not really worry about anything." Likewise, Tara highlighted that her experience of the group was akin to previous safe experiences such as attending summer camp:

Tara – It made me think of a summer camp.

Sean – Oh yeah?

Tara – Um...yeah, just being safe, and relaxed to do whatever and open to new concepts.

Sean – Really? What do you mean 'safe'?

Tara – Well, like, I didn't feel I had to hold back as much as sometimes I feel like in the community or at school. Like I could just be me and not have to worry about judgement, which I am worried about a lot.

Tara's evaluation that she didn't feel she had to "hold back" is linked to her and Emma's earlier assessment that the group environment was non-judgmental and supportive.

This finding is not surprising given that the group was designed to foster this sense of safety. For example, in the first session, while developing “group rules” or guidelines for the group, participants were invited to consider that they could mutually agree to create an environment where they could let their guard down for what would amount to be a mere two hours of their week. What would be required was commitment to non-judging others and a concerted effort to eliminate all put-downs, even those meant in a joking manner, which is particularly difficult given its prevalence in the way many youth communicate with one another. As it turned out, both male and female groups were successful in adopting a “clean air policy” in that very few, if any, comments were made by participants during the group sessions that could be construed as put-downs. In fact, the group sessions were very respectful and this helped to align the group with previous research exploring the creation of safe spaces for vulnerable populations (Harper, 2015). While describing her work implementing a mindfulness skills group with teens who display challenging behaviours, Harper (2015) affirmed the importance of creating safe spaces: “We create a safe space and invite everyone to try out new ways of being. For some, maybe their reputation in their real life will not allow vulnerability or experimentation; they can try it on here” (p. 117). Additionally, Nind and colleagues (2012) found that safe spaces facilitated a strong sense of social connection. As was discussed in the previous chapter, creating safe spaces was in part a result of the way the group was developed. By implementing a guideline called challenge by choice at the outset of the group, participants understood that they could partake in as much or as little of the activities as they wanted, essentially putting them in the driver’s seat of their own group experience (Tucker, 2009). Previous researchers established that the psychological safety of group participants can also lead to the experience of fun (Hromek &

Roffey, 2012). The next section describes the experience of fun as the final component of social support as highlighted by the participants.

Having fun. In general, the importance of creating an environment where youth will have a fun experience cannot be overstated in engaging vulnerable youth (Coholic, Eys, & Lougheed, 2012). Given the specific challenges of youth transitioning out of foster care, there was a need to facilitate mindfulness and arts-based methods in an alternative and more holistic way, one which is more likely to engage youth who are reluctant to participate in a formal helping process (Coholic, 2011). This idea is supported elsewhere in the literature, including one study where art-based methods were used to engage adolescents who were deemed at risk due to such factors as poverty and family instability, and had been excluded from mainstream education due to difficult to manage behaviour, emotional and social difficulties (Olson-McBride & Page, 2012). Similarly, researchers also reported on the use of a drama program as a safe space to successfully facilitate teaching anger management skills with young people (van den Berg, Coetzee, & Munro, 2014). The use of experiential and arts-based methods to teach mindfulness helps create a positive experience for youth transitioning out of foster care that is strengths-based. Using developmentally appropriate methods can engage youth in research in ways that are meaningful for them, and can help ensure that the ideas being explored are from their unique perspectives (Linzmayr & Halpenny, 2014). The imaginative process can help youth solve problems by bringing attention to youths' assets rather than deficits while having fun throughout the process can keep youth engaged (Malchiodi, 2008). Furthermore, the experience of fun facilitates the process of perspective-taking, encouraging youth to explore alternative possibilities and avoiding compartmentalizing into absolutes (Langer, 1993; 2000).

Overwhelmingly, participants in the current study reported that they had “fun.” The experience of fun speaks to what researchers in education have long-known and results from the earlier HAP process had helped to confirm: students are more likely to learn when they are experiencing enjoyment in activities (Coholic, Loughheed, & Lebreton, 2009; Rowley, 2007). In group work, having fun is important because the experience of fun allows the therapeutic intent of the activity to reach the intended audience. The appropriate use of humour reduces stress and increases attention to the activity at hand (Dane, 2000; Romero & Pescosolido, 2008; Wooten, 1996). Furthermore, humour can promote safety and facilitate bonding among group members. Humour can also assist groups of people in sharing new perspectives with one another, and this can help individuals develop new meanings for themselves (Garlick, 2006). Burnett (2015) articulated the notion that the experience of having fun should underline a positive experience of learning mindfulness for teens so as many participants as possible develop an understanding how these new skills may help them in their lives.

Hearing from the participants that the group was regarded as a fun experience was also not surprising given the use of arts-based methods. For example, Alison articulated that she fondly anticipated the group experience week to week: “it [the group] was fun and I looked forward to it every week.” Similarly, Lily explained how she positively recalled thinking about the group: “I’m at school and then I have... I’m like [groans] I have to take the bus home. Oh, no wait! I get to go spend two hours here and do fun stuff.” Alison recalled one specific activity named “Best Medicine”, which was explicitly linked to the importance of having fun: “I think I remember the point of the laughing thing. It was like, to release, dopamine. Yeah, it was a way to like, be happy.”

In “Best Medicine” youth were invited to sit comfortably on the floor in a circle and to focus their attention on the sight and sound of a rolling medicine ball, as it is slowly passed across the floor between them. After the ball begins to roll, youth are encouraged to say the name of the person they passed the ball to and to laugh loudly. Facilitators can set the tone for the activity by volunteering to begin. In my experience facilitating this activity, most participants begin to smile as soon as the person rolling the ball has laughed. The mood is contagious and soon most participants are laughing uncontrollably. After a short period (five minutes or less), the facilitator discussed the physiological benefits of laughing and breathing from our diaphragm (Mendelson et al., 2010). Soon thereafter, participants are taught some basic deep “belly” breathing techniques and the practice is repeated in subsequent group sessions.

The use of laughter in this activity was purposeful, creating the opportunity for the facilitator to discuss the physiological benefits of laughter including how having fun reinforces internal awareness of physiological processes, and can enhance positive self-evaluation and emotion regulation (Gregorowski & Seedat, 2013). Understanding what is occurring within our bodies as we experience various emotional states plays a large role in our ability to challenge how we normally react. Here, it is the underlying importance of the role of the facilitator in assisting youth to learn about the physiological benefits of mindfulness practice that cannot be understated (Hromek & Roffey, 2009). The teachable moment from Best Medicine underlined how each individual has the ability to change their mood and to positively influence the feelings of others. Moreover, the topic of humour in general served as an important bridge to discuss mindfulness given that it is seldom the actual difficulties in life that cause pain but how we relate to them (Klein, 2001). Best Medicine proved to be very popular among participants so much so that it was duly noted in survey results a year after the group sessions had ended (these results

are described in the next chapter). Overall, having fun further reinforced the participants' positive engagement with the material, and success of utilizing art-based methods, thus helping to establish that the approach was client-centered and strengths-based. The experience of fun further reinforces the use of arts-based methods as a way to both facilitate and study participation in mindfulness practice and ideas about resilience and mindfulness.

In summary, the participants highlighted three aspects of their group experience that supported the finding that the group had offered and was perceived as an important source of social support, linking to emergent research about the importance of relational permanence, supportive relationships, and social network analysis for vulnerable youth. Additionally, this finding related to attachment theory in the sense of effective service provision helping to compensate for what may have been lost earlier in a child's life.

In a recent review of studies related to social support with youth in the process of leaving care, researchers described a particular set of qualities that service providers should ensure within corresponding services (Hiles, Moss, Wright, & Dallos, 2013). For instance, in their relationships with helping professionals, key informants talked about their need for consistency, longevity, reliability, using client-centered and strength-based approaches. Hiles, Moss, Wright and Dallos (2013) also suggested that the power of positive peer relationships should be more effectively utilized. This was trying for participants in the present study who expressed difficulty forming trusting relationships. Despite acknowledging that support was important, these youth identified with wanting to protect their personal sense of self-reliance.

The present study was able to link both the provision of non-intrusive formal helping professionals (the group facilitators) and exposure to healthy peer relationships to offer social support. Said another way, group participation was a successful exercise in helping the

participants to develop trust. This is in keeping with relational child and youth care practice that highlights the importance of intervention during adolescence by borrowing from attachment theory in saying that it is never too late to challenge the established inner working models that youth internalized during earlier periods of disruption by offering new models of nurturing, caring relationships. Furthermore, previous researchers have underlined how developing trust in a group context can improve engagement and participation in important prevention programming (Tanner, Secor-Turner, Garwick, Sieving, & Rush, 2012).

With respect to future research, while there is an abundance of literature detailing the experience of youth leaving care and capturing the tension youth experience between asserting self-reliance and seeking help, there is much less research demonstrating how this tension is to be reconciled, how social support can bridge youth transitioning out of foster care into adulthood, and certainly very few studies detailing effective interventions. Indeed, youth aged over 16 years often fall between the cracks in service provision not being able to access either child-centred or adult-focused services. The current study represents one feasible way to offer access to social support that appeared to be engaging for participants.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented for consideration the main challenges of being involved with the child welfare system and aging-out of foster care and described participants' perceptions of resilience. Frequently, participants' descriptions were consistent with the literature, emphasizing how youth transitioning out of foster care face a particular set of challenges related to both early trauma and to the aging-out process. This resulting scenario meant participants were forced to grow-up quickly to face a set of unique challenges without the same level of support as peers not involved in the child welfare system. These results further underline the need for greater public

awareness of the particular trials that these youth face, and more effective service provision. To this end, reflecting a strength-based approach informed by the participants themselves, I described the key features of resilience that participants discussed in relation to their process of negotiating the challenges of system-involvement. This provided a more detailed understanding of how youth transitioning out of foster care conceptualized resilience, a key concept that has been traditionally defined and measured in ways incongruent with the experiences of these youth. Participants described individual strength and social support as central components of their view of resilience. In line with the previous findings of other researchers, participants expressed a need to balance the tension between being self-reliant while simultaneously depending on others. Furthermore, their view of these features remained consistent in pre and post-group interviews suggesting the group itself did not change their perceptions of resilience.

The final section of this chapter presented and examined the results of the study that supported the group experience as being a source of social support that participants found important to resilience. Having established that group participation can mediate a key feature of how youth understand resilience; I will now examine participants' understandings of mindfulness. To the best of my knowledge, the current study is the first to explore the feasibility of an MBI with youth transitioning out of foster care. Thus, the participants' understanding of mindfulness including the apparent benefits of mindful practice are of benefit to researchers, families and service providers seeking effective service provision for a particular vulnerable group of young adults.

Chapter Five

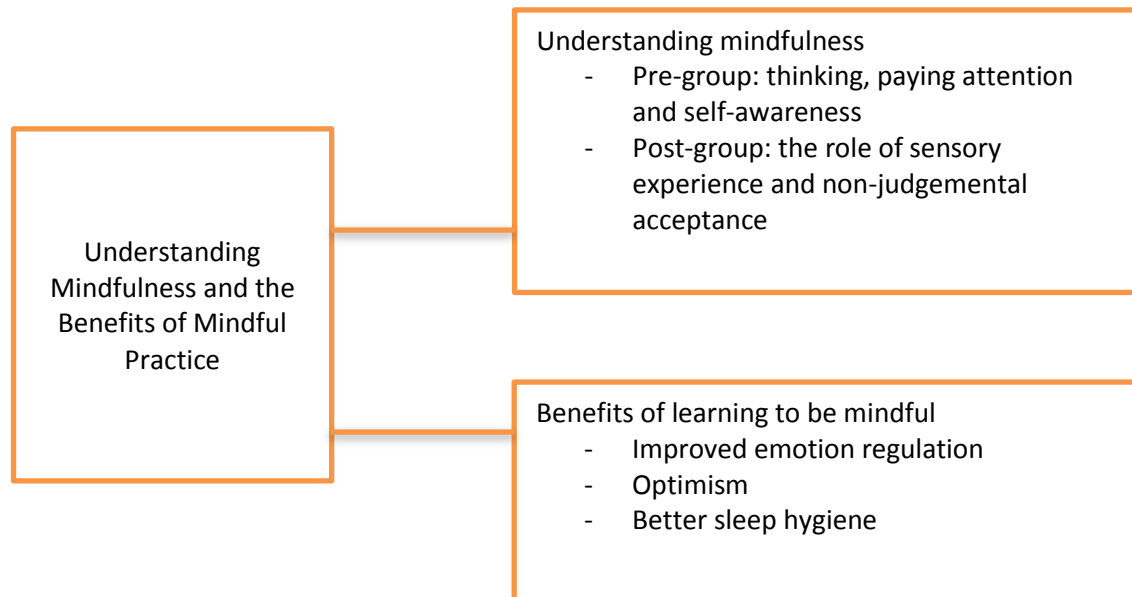
Understanding Mindfulness and its Benefits

The previous chapter discussed the main challenges of child welfare system-involvement and aging out from foster care, and described key features of resilience as reported by the participants. These included the importance of (1) a mindset characterized by “going with the flow,” (2) inner “strength,” and (3) supportive relationships. These findings can help us to understand how some youth transitioning out of foster care navigate challenges in their lives with fewer supports than peers not involved in the child welfare system. Their experiences illustrate how they value their self-reliance, yet struggle between solving problems on their own and reaching out to others for support. I made the point about the overemphasis on independent living skills (insofar as the messages imparted on these youth through current policy and interventions) at the cost of relational and communicative skill-building that may be equally important in promoting well-being and long-term educational and health outcomes. Participants also underlined how the group itself offered an important source of social support that felt safe, inclusive, and fun. Social support was highlighted by participants as a key feature related to doing well despite considerable adversity.

This chapter examines how participants described mindfulness and the benefits of learning to be mindful, tracing the development of their ideas before and after the group experience. Mindfulness was a key philosophy and practice that was facilitated with the youth throughout the group. Connections between the concepts of mindfulness and resilience are explored. In particular, participants identified that as a result of their participation in the group, their emotion regulation and sense of optimism improved, and they experienced better sleep hygiene (see Figure 3 for an illustration of these major themes).

Figure 3.

Understanding Mindfulness and the Benefits of Mindful Practice



Understanding Mindfulness

As established in the previous chapter, participants described three ideas that characterized their understanding of resilience, one of which can be related directly to mindfulness. After incurring multiple losses and choosing to focus on one day at a time as a way of coping, participants described a mindset that could be characterized as “going with the flow.” Consciously choosing to focus on the moment, rather than ruminating about the past or worrying about the future, is an important step toward being mindful or living mindfully. The next section will help to explore this viewpoint by demonstrating how participants’ understanding of mindfulness developed following the group experience.

Thinking, attention, and awareness. Prior to the group sessions, mindfulness was described by most participants mainly using one or more of the following three processes: thinking, paying attention, and self-awareness. For example, Beth described mindfulness as a

cognitive process: “When I think of mindfulness, I think of thinking.” Likewise, Alison suggested that being mindful meant being fully “attentive” using a metaphor to describe an increased level of concentration: “Instead of the cup being half full like totally full. I guess that’s what I think of it now. I think of it [her focus] being, like, all there.” On the other hand, Emma articulated that mindfulness was akin to the concept of self-awareness: “Kind of being aware of your surroundings I would think, and like other possibilities.” In the same vein, Lily proposed that mindfulness meant experiencing greater awareness: “understanding what’s going on inside yourself and around you.” Self-awareness was also the idea that George focused on: “to me that [mindfulness] sounds like being aware of everything around you and being aware of yourself, of where you want to go, and being aware of others.” Building on these conceptualizations of mindfulness, Ian related mindfulness with paying attention to the needs of others: “It means being aware of other people and yourself. Put other people into consideration, like don’t be so selfish, and try to be as respectful as you can.” This description in particular was interesting given how little teaching about mindfulness had occurred prior to the group sessions yet how closely his understanding mirrored one of the tenets of mindfulness philosophy, specifically the purpose of increasing feelings and acts of compassion for others (Armstrong, 2001).

Some of this early understanding of mindfulness may have been influenced by the written explanation of the research study that included a description of mindfulness provided to participants before the first interview. Specifically, the information letter quoted the oft-used Kabat-Zinn (2003) definition and further described how mindfulness would be taught using arts-based methods, providing examples of the activities, and how the objectives of teaching mindfulness in this way were to learn more about how it might be useful for youth transitioning out of foster care. Since participation was voluntary, it may have been that participants who

agreed to partake in the group were interested in mindfulness and/or art. Indeed, in the first interviews, some participants already understood aspects of mindfulness such as focusing on the present moment, and striving to be non-judgmental. Beth, for example, relayed that she had already attempted to begin becoming more mindful by “just thinking about what I’m doing today, and not worrying about tomorrow.” Likewise, Tara stated that mindfulness meant looking at situations with clarity but without evaluation: “not being judgemental of what’s going around. It’s just looking at what’s going on and realizing it’s there.” Above all, findings from interviews before the group experience suggested that participants had developed a familiarity with the concept of mindfulness, relating it to ideas such as thinking and attention, and most notably compassion/empathy and self-awareness.

Despite multiple definitions of self-awareness, there is general agreement among researchers that it involves knowledge regarding the self, including an awareness of our thoughts, emotions, and our actions (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975). Richards, Campenni, and Muse-Burke (2010) suggested that our current understanding of self-awareness is based on similar constructs such as self-consciousness (Webb, Marsh, Schneiderman, & Davis, 1989), and insight (Grant, Franklin, & Langford, 2002). The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2003) described self-awareness as knowing what we presently feel, having an accurate understanding of our abilities, and a rooted sense of self-confidence. Moreover, Warin, and Muldoon (2009) stressed that self-awareness should encompass our capacity to sustain, develop, and distinguish a diverse story of ourselves.

Self-awareness is a notable outcome of learning to become more mindful because raising self-awareness has been related to improved self-esteem, and self-compassion (Coholic &

LeBreton, 2009; Neff, 2011). Improving self-esteem and self-compassion are important for youth in foster care who often blame themselves for earlier events and who may have internalized negative self-worth. One of the ways learning mindfulness can help someone become more self-aware is by learning to focus attention on thoughts and feelings, without judgement, and recognizing the conscious choice involved in how one deals with emergent emotions. If someone learns to observe emergent feelings and avoids quickly suppressing or judging or reacting angrily, they may cultivate a less judgemental view of themselves, foster improved social skills with others, and improve techniques for coping with stress (Coholic, 2011). Being mindful can help a person to observe and accept emotional cues and a steady stream of thoughts as passing events rather than valid reflections of reality, and it may strengthen the way these emotional cues are processed, as opposed to simply ruminating (Teper, Segal & Inzlicht, 2013). Indeed, in the previous chapter, there was evidence that participants' descriptions of going with the flow indicated an apt starting point for observation, reflection, and choosing more helpful perspectives amidst difficult circumstances. Working through daily challenges and experiencing success builds self-confidence helping to solidify strategies for more complex problem-solving by reinforcing the individual's belief that they can succeed.

Thus, the process of becoming more self-aware includes acknowledging painful emotions, and learning to relate to those feelings in a different way. This is the crux of the argument for the value of teaching mindfulness to teenagers. As discussed in the previous chapter, adolescence is a period of time marked by physiological, emotional, and social changes. With teenagers often struggling to manage increased autonomy across educational, vocational, familial and interpersonal domains, they have plenty of opportunities to practice complex problem-solving, and effectively integrate improved emotion regulation. Of course, the problem

is more complicated for youth involved in the child welfare system. Participants faced an even steeper hill to climb compared to their peers based on the challenges articulated in the previous chapter. Thus, it was encouraging to see participants link their early understanding of mindfulness with emerging self-awareness; an important building block for higher-level emotional and social well-being.

So, how did the youths' viewpoints about mindfulness change as a result of participating in the group? Initially the youth understood mindfulness to involve cognition, attention and self-awareness, and their understanding of mindfulness continued to include awareness of thoughts and feelings but it expanded to involve greater awareness of (a) the role of their physical senses in experience and (b) endorsing non-judgmental acceptance in life circumstances. The group experience appeared to assist the youth develop a more complete understanding of mindfulness, increased self-awareness and feelings of optimism, and improved emotion regulation, and sleep hygiene.

Awareness of thoughts and feelings after the group. Following the group sessions, participants continued to demonstrate awareness of their thoughts and feelings. Why this is important for these youth, in the thrust of adolescence, is that their ability to reflect and distinguish between their feelings about a situation and the situation itself may be limited. In his popular book, Eckhart Tolle affirms this sentiment by advising the reader to “forget about your life situation for a while and pay attention to your life” (Tolle, 2004, p. 43). While the challenges that these youth may face can seem insurmountable, I hoped that raising awareness of their reactions to those same challenges and providing opportunities to build skills strengthens their ability to constructively respond. Affirming that thoughts are just thoughts as opposed to universal truths about one's self was an important message for these participants to hear. To this

end, it was encouraging to observe that participants appeared to continue to link the concept of mindfulness to understanding their own thoughts and feelings. Lily, for example, stated that mindfulness was “understanding what’s going on, not just what’s going on around you but what’s going on inside you so, you know, knowing how you’re feeling and what you’re thinking.” Similarly, Tara articulated a clear understanding of appraising her feelings moment-by-moment:

It’s [mindfulness] understanding where you’re at, physically and emotionally, you know, where you are in life, knowing what you’re feeling so if you’re feeling sad you can know that you’re feeling sad, and being happy, you can know that you can be happy.

Explanations such as these coincide with other researchers’ findings in that some have stated how thoughts and feelings can be conceptualized as sources of information to be explored in order to develop more intimacy with experience (Segal, Williams & Teasdale, 2002). For instance, investigators studying the effects of an MBI among incarcerated youth, determined that the participants experienced an increase in “cognitive, emotional, physical and present-moment activity within oneself” (p. 235) and supported this finding with statements such as “you just catch up on how you’re feeling and what you are feeling [and] what is going on inside of you” (Himmelstein, Hastings, Shapiro, & Heery, 2012, p. 235). Similarly, in the current study, Tara recounted an experience outside of the group that indicated improved self-awareness:

It was kind of raining outside so the horse shook and I wanted off. And I was really scared of, you know, getting booted off or you know having the horse start going

crazy or whatever. And I just kind of took a look at what I was doing and thinking and realizing that it wasn't really rational, and just kind of calming myself down.

Sean – How'd you do that – calm yourself down?

Tara – Well the thought that it's not really rational decision. There's nothing really scaring the horse. And that's usually what happens when horses go like that.

They're either being aggravated or abused or you know someone kicks them and they get mad or something scares them and startles them and they just, you know, like, leave you. They just start running off, and even though they're bigger than us, they are really gentle and I knew I was in good hands with the trainer so I just kind of took a deep breath.

Tara's evaluation of her reaction to the unfolding situation supports the idea that young people learning mindfulness may develop increased self-awareness and greater capacity to cope with stressful situations (Metz et al., 2013).

Sensory awareness. Evidence of improved self-awareness also included references to the physical senses, which is important because understanding how and what information is being received can deepen one's appreciation of the body's role in our sensory perception and our overall experience of mindfulness. Many responses by the participants following the group sessions described mindfulness according to the body's senses, reflecting how activities were facilitated in the group. For example, mindfulness exercises were designed to underline how people all through their lives use their senses to observe and pay attention to the cues around them in their surroundings, whether they notice these or not. This was an important change that participants did not express prior to group participation. One of our objectives in the group was to practice noticing how we can become more aware by paying attention to our sensory

experiences. Participants were instructed how to walk and eat mindfully where the senses of sight, touch, hearing, and taste, as vehicles for observation and transmission of information to their brains were discussed at length. The idea was that mindfulness could help change the way participants related to the emotional stimuli from being fearful or apprehensive to being more tolerant and open (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999). In this way, mindfulness can help individuals appreciate their surroundings, rather than practice avoidance, escape, or constant distraction (Morone, Lynch, Greco, Tindle, & Weiner, 2008).

Accordingly, Ian described that mindfulness was “being in touch with all your senses and seeing things in a different way” and being more “in tune to what’s happening” in the surrounding environment. Furthermore, Ian relayed that he was now accustomed to purposefully paying more attention: “sometimes I go up to the trails and do walks and they are a little bit more interesting and you kind of pay attention to different sounds and things you see.” Ian’s comments help demonstrate how nature can mediate mindful experience and anchor the learning that occurred in the group sessions. Khan (2015) recently affirmed how valuable a tool nature is: “Mindfulness in nature restores our senses, brings us back, again and again, to what is now, to what is present” (p. 274). The way mindfulness resonated by way of sensory experience for these participants was reminiscent of how mindfulness is being adapted for non-adult populations whereby attention is drawn to the awareness of surroundings through the use of distinct sounds and smells “giving equal prominence to sensorial education” (Lillard, 2011, p. 80). George was also able to share a story about a trip where practicing mindfulness had enhanced his experience on the back of a motorcycle:

When we were driving, you could smell the trees. And when we were driving by a creek, you can hear with your senses; it's a lot different. And I tried to be more aware to what was around me, [to] see what was around me, [and] hear what was going on around me. Oh yeah, that was what I liked. The bike ride down there was definitely the best part. 'Cause there was this one part where we went through a bunch of oak trees, and you could really smell that. And there was this time where we were following, for at least a hundred miles, we were following a really rapid river going all the way up, and we were following it. I just loved watching the river, like, just watching the river the whole way up.

Ian and George's comments are consistent with findings from another study where researchers studying the implementation of a mindfulness activity "Meditation on the Soles of the Feet" (with youth diagnosed with conduct disorder) saw behaviour improve by diverting emotional arousing stimuli to a benign neutral area of attention (Singh et al, 2007). Training on the meditation explicitly focused on the physical sensation of touch inviting participants to "move your toes, feel your shoes covering your feet, feel the texture of your socks or hose, the curve of your arch, and the heels of your feet against the back of your shoes" (p. 59). These youth were invited to delay immediate reaction to emotional arousal by focusing their attention through the meditation in order to allow time to elapse to relate to the emotional stimuli in a different, more benign and accepting way. In the current study, participants were given similar opportunities in each group session through guided meditations that would link the benefits of focusing on the breath when dealing with distressing feelings.

Meditative activities are emerging as accepted preventative practices to enhance well-being and treat a myriad of ailments. Through the practice of meditation it is anticipated that one gains clarity of their experiences by slowing the pace of thoughts (and corresponding feelings) rushing through the mind, resulting in new insights and less stress, most recently evidenced in a broad review of meditation programs published in a mainstream medical journal (Goyal et al., 2014). The key to this process is the non-judgment of thoughts and feelings, which I will discuss in the next section. In the group sessions, meditations focusing on the breath and deep-breathing exercises were shortened (compared to the original source material) to reflect the brevity of anticipated attention spans, and also to build comfort and success with the practice. Over the course of the sessions, meditations and breathing exercises were repeated and lengthened slightly as the participants demonstrated an ability to engage in a longer sustained practice and discussed the apparent benefits. Resulting self-awareness in the current study suggested participants experienced confidence and mastery in terms of practicing mindfulness for longer periods of time. This was an encouraging finding given how instances of affirming a sense of control are important to many youth in care who may feel their lives are out of their personal control (Geenen & Powers, 2007). In keeping with a recent MBI meta-analysis where researchers underlined benefits such as reducing stress (Kallapiran, Koo, Kirubakaran, & Hancock, 2015), Beth explained how worrying situations gave way to the tools she had developed to navigate stress:

Sean – Stress triggered your thinking about the group?

Beth – Yes.

Sean – Well that's good.

Beth – Well because whenever I'm stressed, I'm always told to just breathe. And it's like well yeah, obviously, that's what the group was about and I got that part.

So, I was like thinking about the group the whole time.

The connection between sensory awareness and coping with stress was made by teaching the participants that no matter what happens in our day to day lives, we have the power to interpret the situation in ways that will ultimately benefit, rather than harm; again, that individuals have the power to choose how to interpret information, and understand the underlying causes of distress. Becoming increasingly aware that one has the power to make a constructive choice about which perspective to take is part of learning about mindfulness, leading to improved coping skills and higher relationship satisfaction (Barnes, Brown, Krusemark, Campbell, & Rogge, 2007). For example, Barnes et al (2007) found that mindfulness cultivated a greater capacity to lower emotional stress, and improve the quality of communication between partners. The next section explores how in this process of learning mindfulness, non-judgement became a central component of their experience.

Non-judgmental acceptance. According to Kabat-Zinn, (1994), mindfulness includes being non-judgmental while observing experience: non-judgement typifying the objectivity and sense of curiosity required in mindful practice (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Importantly, it was noted that participants described being more non-judgmental following group participation. It was encouraging to hear participants discuss being non-judgmental based on the relevance to earlier discussions about the tendency to self-blame. For example, Lily described mindfulness as “just being. You're not worrying about what's going to happen. Oh my goodness, I'm doing this wrong. What am I doing, this is terrible, just kind of letting it all go.” This acceptance was also articulated by Tara who eloquently described her ability to adopt a broader perspective, which

researchers have identified as an outcome cultivated with mindfulness practice (Knowles, Goodman, & Semple, 2015):

It's like you can see things from any point of view. You aren't narrow-minded. You're open to any possibility and you're just kind of letting life be as it will be and accepting it, you know? You're not judging. You're not really feeling anything about it. It's just this is what is.

In learning about mindfulness in the group sessions, participants were exposed to the message of nurturing a more kind, compassionate view, principally toward inner reactions of one's thoughts and feelings. Non-judgment distinguishes mindfulness from self-awareness in that one might develop awareness of inner thoughts and feelings and be subjectively self-critical throughout this process. Thus, non-judgement signals that participants expanded their understanding of mindfulness beyond self-awareness. Non-judgement was also noteworthy because of its relationship to acceptance; both concepts figure prominently in how people more effectively deal with issues such as chronic pain for example (Chiesa & Serretti, 2011). The effort spent avoiding pain actually magnifies its experience, particularly in the face of unsuccessful attempts to quell it. A non-judgmental investigation of the pain helps those in pain gain more intimate knowledge: highs, lows, catalysts, and moments where it abates. Similarly, in the groups, through the use of the guided meditations, the participants learned to notice the most distressing feelings such as guilt or shame, and to observe these without judgment leading to, over time and with enough practice, eventual acceptance of those same uncomfortable feelings and the prevailing life circumstances.

The idea of acceptance is foundational within mindfulness philosophy and practice (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999). Much of learning to be mindful hinges on accepting the

present moment, and the corresponding range of emotions that may be in accompaniment. This does not mean being satisfied with a result or complicit with how a situation has unfolded but rather a “wholehearted understanding of the truth of our lives, our feelings and our world” (Emmons & Kranz, 2006, p. 225). According to Carson and Langer (2006), “the absence of ability to unconditionally accept oneself can lead to a variety of emotional difficulties, including uncontrolled anger and depression” (p. 29). Conversely, acceptance has been characterized as a key component of recovery for trauma survivors (Goldsmith et al., 2014). In becoming more accepting, one ceases to struggle with changing what has occurred (and what often cannot be changed) and instead focuses inward on their reaction to what happened. Again, this may be particularly important for youth transitioning out of foster care who sometimes blame themselves for the situations they face and who have to deal with the effects of traumatic experiences. To this end, Lily relayed that learning to be mindful had helped her: “mostly just learning to accept things, as they are.” Tara was also able to explain that acceptance was very important to her personal strategy of negotiating family challenges:

I think you should know to be accepting and to kind of learn to overcome whatever happens. If it's not in your best interests, or you know you don't have control of it because you're only creating a bigger obstacle for you if you don't. It blocks off a lot emotionally if you can't get over something. . . .Overcoming my family problems, [long pause] I just have to remember like, if I don't get past it, I'm not going to move on in life.

With acceptance, participants were also better positioned to become resilient. Lily, having previously becoming overwhelmed with academic and extracurricular pursuits, also expressed that “It's easier if you accept that you can't do all this and I need to, you know, try and decide what's most important and what I actually don't need to do, and what I can't do right now.”

Without unconditional acceptance, it would be very difficult for participants to go with the flow; acceptance facilitating the way participants adapt to changing situational demands in their lives. In the group sessions, discussions often returned to the idea that “it’s only a fight (with yourself) if you show up”, emphasizing the view that it benefits participants facing challenges to focus on what they can control (their reactions to the decisions made around them), rather than what is out of their control (the decisions themselves). Lily later expounded on this point underlining the importance of being able to let go of how she negatively viewed past events: “I think probably to be resilient you can’t dwell on it I guess because then you’re never going to let it go, and then I don’t know are you really bouncing back if you’re not letting it go?” Similarly, Tara also acknowledged that her own positive future relied on her ability to come to terms with the dramatic events that precipitated her entering the child welfare system: “overcoming my family problems, I just have to remember, like, if I don’t get past it, I’m not going to move on in life.” In this way, mindfulness assisted Tara to develop an understanding that she created stress in her life when she took responsibility for things that were not in her control or that were not her responsibility. Moreover, Beth described her ability to now exercise more choice in how she viewed the past::

You have to make the best out of a bad situation. If you have like, okay, you know what? This is my past. This is how my parents are. This is exactly how I’m going to be. If you have that kind of mind, then of course you’re gonna be exactly that . . .

People with bad pasts get judged so much. But the thing is, people who judge them haven’t had the bad experience, so they don’t know.

Likewise, Shelly went on to explain that accepting all of her traits, whether construed as positive or negative, was important to mitigate negative thinking: “to be able to stand yourself, you have

to be able to handle who you are as a person rather than hating yourself or judging yourself for who you are.” Even more succinctly, Shelly stated: “They can think what they think and I’m me, so I don’t give a shit.”

In summary, before the group experience, the participants related mindfulness to thinking, focusing attentively, and an emerging awareness of one’s thoughts and feelings. After the group experience, participants relayed a more thorough understanding of mindfulness characterized by knowing how one is thinking and feeling, becoming aware of their senses and the surrounding environment, and being more non-judgmental and accepting of themselves and of past life events. The focus of this chapter will now explore how the development of mindfulness led to a perception of positive outcomes. As a result, participants’ coping strategies prior to, and following, the group experience are discussed. Overall, participants relayed a broad range of coping strategies, some arguably more helpful and healthy than others. The major differences reported following group participation were improved emotion regulation, optimism, and sleep hygiene.

The Benefits of Learning to be Mindful

Prior to the group sessions, participants described current coping strategies and shared instances of anger, avoidance, or use of non-prescription drugs to escape some situations and/or feelings. Alison admittedly explained that her anger could be explosive: “when I’m angry I throw things across my room and yell at whomever I’m mad at. I do it all the time, especially here [foster parent’s home]. It’s really bad. When I get sad, it turns to anger really, really fast.” Similarly, Shelly suggested that in order to evade uncomfortable discussions with others she would sidestep the conversation: “I avoid the subject or if it happens I generally change the subject.” Alison also stated she practiced avoidance: I try to avoid it [problems], get around it. . .

Not think about them. Not talk about them.” Likewise, Emma relayed that if she could block out challenging circumstances, she would:

I try to tune it out and put it on the back burner, because the more you worry about stuff the more it makes it worse, or seem worse... I think it works good for me. Some people are different. Some people would try and solve it. I find that when I try and help things it just - sometimes it just makes it twice as bad.

Moreover, Emma explained that her decision to cope by using marijuana assisted her to manage her feelings and feelings of being overwhelmed: “I do them [drugs] to control my moods. Because I end up freaking out if I don’t, like really bad freak outs, like little kid tantrums almost.”

All of these strategies were consistent with participants’ emphasis on going with the flow as a way to deal with adversity. As was established in the previous chapter, going with the flow appeared to mean a general avoidance, where possible, of adversity. On the other hand, going with the flow also signaled a readiness to learn about important concepts to mindful practice such as non-judgmental acceptance. It is also important to keep in mind that seemingly unhealthy coping strategies might be relevant for youth when assessed within the context of their lives (Rogoff, 2003). Ungar (2011) reminded us that people living amid challenging circumstances are more readily able to change when existing supports, interventions, and policies reflect their own ability to navigate and negotiate to resources that are culturally and contextually meaningful. By locating participants within the reality that reflects their current challenges, such as moving foster homes, the urge to categorize maladaptive or adaptive strategies is removed. Instead, we are encouraged to reflect on the participants’ strengths and need for surrounding supports.

Certainly, prior to the group sessions beginning, the participants also relayed the capacity for employing a broad range of healthy coping strategies in the onset of the same emotions. Most participants, for instance, alluded to thinking before acting. In response to a question about her approach to solving problems, Lily explained that she was able to think about difficult circumstances before reacting: “I just take some time and think about it, like how I got into this difficult situation. I don’t rush it or anything but you want to try and think about what you can do to pull yourself back into a situation that you find less difficult.” Similarly, Shelly reported being able to think about situations and possible solutions: “I think about them [situations] and I’ll think about something that happened and I’ll be like okay well sure I did this but this probably would have been better.” Shelly also talked about combining thinking with physical exercise: “When I’m running, I generally think or pound it on the pavement.” Tara suggested that thinking before acting meant “being proactive” and Ian maintained this process assisted him to “filter my anger.”

Other coping responses ranged from listening/playing music and physical exercise to working with animals. For instance, Ian discussed “taking a walk or something, not just to freak out on someone” and later explained that he had learned that his younger brother reflected his behaviour: “he kinda shows me what I’m acting like” implying that this motivated him to evaluate his own behaviour prior to judging his brother. In another example, Emma relayed that listening to music was helpful to manage her emotions: “If I get, like, mad or something, I just listen to music; [music] kinda calms me down.” In the same vein, Ian described how a teacher regularly played music in the classroom as a way to encourage meditative practice before periods of study: “Well, he [my teacher] explained it to me. We have to close our eyes then just sit and be calm and stuff. Some of the songs are pretty weird but eventually you get used to them.”

Shelly reported that her job at a pet shelter was the best way to manage difficult feelings: “I put all my negative energy into animals and it kind of just turns positive.” Reflecting her love of animals, she described the intimacy of horseback riding:

They can totally tell your emotions when you’re on them. If you’re really hyper than the horse is obviously going to be hyper because they can tell that you’re hyped up, but if you’re really calm, the horse is just like yeah whatever.

In summary, I have described how, prior to the groups beginning, the participants were not without some skills in regulating their emotions. However, following group participation, participants described how the experience of learning mindfulness and improving self-awareness had fostered (1) improved abilities for emotion regulation and coping, particularly in relation to school stress, (2) increased feelings of optimism especially by fostering the ability to develop and select alternative perspectives on situations, and (3) better sleep hygiene.

Emotion regulation. Emotion regulation can be described as a process of adapting to the strength and extent of one’s feelings and physiological responses in order to accomplish a task (Weems & Pina, 2010). Research literature supports the use of mindfulness to improve emotion regulation through the development of self-awareness (Biegel, Brown, Shapiro, & Schubert, 2009; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Grossman, Neimann, Schmidt, & Watach, 2004). In the current study, mindfulness-based practices were taught and used to draw participants’ attention to aspects of self-awareness such as bodily physiological processes and changes to mood. Emma acknowledged that in her experience of the group sessions, she recognized changes in how she felt : “There was a couple times that I went there [to the group] and started, like, in a bad mood then my mood got regulated, like I wasn’t in a good mood but I wasn’t in a bad mood.” By

promoting awareness of these processes, youth can cultivate greater understanding of how entwined their physiological state is with “feeling” and with subsequent decision-making.

Participants highlighted how learning to be mindful further improved how they previously dealt with circumstances that would have normally upset them, which suggested to me that participants had improved emotion regulation. Numerous references to feeling an increased sense of calm were made by the participants. Shelly, for example, emphasized that the group experience had helped put her at ease: “I think that it [experience of the group] helped me calm down.” Tara also mentioned that she thought the group experience had helped her challenge previous ways of thinking and acting: “just changing my thinking on things, you know? Really making sure I don’t flip.” This can be especially challenging for youth to master who might have established patterns in the past of reacting angrily as a way of coping. To avoid an argument with a sibling, for instance, Ian explained a strategy of intentionally putting more time between his experience of feeling unsettled emotions and any corresponding actions: “trying to take 15 seconds to do something to try to veer myself away from continuing on with fighting.” Ian’s comment is a good example of a participant exercising self-control to stop and think instead of reacting impulsively. Additionally, this was also exemplified by George when he reflected on the benefits of remaining composed: “when you learn like to calm down, and then if you have more patience, it’ll be a little easier to do some things.”

From a biological perspective, Lanteri (2008) suggested that understanding one’s physiology can provide an internal safety net that can assist children to address life’s challenges and opportunities. For instance, it is the amygdala, impacted by our emotional state that acts as filter for incoming information. Information received by an “open” mind is directed to the prefrontal cortex, where complex analysis and decision-making may occur. Conversely, in a

negative state of mind or for many youth transitioning out of foster care, a state of stress, anxiety, discomfort and/or panic results in information processed independently by the amygdala, enabling an automatic flight or fight or freeze response, and temporarily abandoning any complex thinking or judgement. Though this process is essential to our survival, the danger facing many youth transitioning out of care, who continually exhibit symptoms of past traumatic events, is they may spend the majority of their day in a state of flight, fight or freeze, effectively stunting their ability to operate effectively. This is supported by researchers who underline the specific use of mindfulness for teens to attain emotion regulation based on the unique patterns of development of the brain at this time, and the detrimental impact of prolonged stress during this crucial period of development (Romeo, 2010; Broderick & Jennings, 2012; Zelazo & Lyons, 2012).

For instance, researchers have confirmed enhanced long-term memory and more complex thinking and reasoning when children felt well-supported and trusting in their classroom environment (Kato & McEwen, 2003). Other researchers also demonstrated that students' positive emotions assisted learning retention, while anxiety exacted the opposite effect (Pawlak, Magarinos, Melchor, McEwen, & Strickland, 2003). More recently, those investigating the neurobiological changes in the teenaged brain have advocated for increased use of mindfulness-based approaches with adolescents based on the way mindfulness helps reduce the negative reactions to stress and strengthens the circuits capable of more constructive coping (Cohen, Wupperman, & Tau, 2013; Richards, Plate and Ernst, 2012).

Applying this knowledge to the current study, teaching mindfulness to youth transitioning out of foster care can help strengthen the capacity for, and understanding of, physiological processes in the brain to develop self-awareness of different emotion states, and techniques for

managing distressing thoughts and feelings. As Lanteri (2008) suggested, the mind plays a pivotal role in a child's ability to become resilient not to mention that when people lack self-regulation they act out, and lack empathy leading to poor relationships with others. Therefore the capacity to regulate one's emotions can provide an internal safety net to address life's challenges and opportunities.

Many participants relayed having applied improved emotion regulation skills in school. Ian, for instance, explained how he used a deep breathing exercise to improve his focus and feel more awake: "I did that at school. When I yawned I remembered what Laura said about if you yawn, she says, you need air and I just did some deep breaths at school, and it worked." Similarly, Beth stated in relation to increased pressure at school that she was implementing skills she learned in the group: "I'm coping; definitely a whole lot of breathing." Likewise, Shelly demonstrated that she had modified a deep breathing activity from the group sessions to fit in the context of the classroom:

I think that mindfulness can help. It can pretty much help with anything: school problems. I usually just do the breathing exercises that we did, like that watermelon one. I don't actually like sit there in class and do that but I'll take a deep breath and when I get a little bit tired, I'll just take a nice deep breath and I'll feel a bit better, and be able to get back to work.

In the same context, Beth, who described increased levels of anger and stress "especially during exams" due to difficulties studying, recounted her experience of becoming more aware of her racing thoughts:

And then I started focusing and I remembered the [mindfulness meditation] CD saying allow your mind to go off topic and then bring it back. So then that's always what I was doing. 'Cause I was like super stressed out.

These comments indicate that the participants were able to integrate exercises into their lives that mitigate the impact of earlier trauma and augment the capacity for self-regulation (Osofsky, 1995). In support of this finding, Teper, Segal and Inzlicht (2013) recently proposed a model describing the relationship between mindfulness, executive control (updating working memory, self-control, shifting between multiple mental tasks), and emotion regulation. In short, these researchers proposed that mindful practices facilitate both increased awareness and acceptance of subtle changes such as a quickening heartbeat, or a rise in the feeling of anger within us. These researchers further contended that the conflict between the way we may have responded in the past, and newly acquired goals of mindful practice lead to improved emotion regulation by way of enhanced executive control. Said another way, mindful practice can increase the attention and acceptance of the “the control alarms” (p. 4) (the emotional prompting event) that so often signals a need to react. Interestingly, while discussing mindfulness practice in the group sessions, we referred to this process as “pressing the pause button.”

Optimism. Participating in the group appeared to increase feelings of optimism, as participants described how the group experience led them to develop alternate, more helpful perspectives on the situations in their lives, leading to feeling more hopeful about navigating the challenges they faced. This is in keeping with what previous researchers described as a generally hopeful view that positive outcomes are possible despite the challenges related to adverse events (Courtney et al., 2007; Gonzalez, 2015). Increased optimism is an exciting finding due to its relatedness to resilience, specifically how optimism can buffer the development of identity

including a strong sense of one's values, beliefs, a sense of purpose, and of future aspirations (Ungar, 2008). According to Brendtro and Ness (1995), "pessimism is seldom useful and often leads to feelings of powerlessness, frustration, and depression. In contrast, optimism feeds a sense of efficacy and motivates coping and adaptive behaviour, even in the face of difficult odds" (p. 3). Indeed, optimism has been related to positive coping, and has predicted positive outcomes following adverse life events (Carver & Scheier, 2002). Tara demonstrated a renewed sense of optimism in how she viewed her life:

Before [the group experience], I didn't really look forward to the day, I just kind of went to sleep, but now it's like I want to get up. I want to do something, you know? I don't want to sit around and waste away. I want to live my life to the fullest and do what I can.

Maybe it just kind of made me realize that we only have so much time I can't waste it.

In another example, Tara described a process of focusing on what she felt was really good about her life:

Really zoning in on the things that are positive in my life, like my mom coming out and friends that are doing really good. So, focusing on the positives, and really centering yourself with some breathing to deal with what's on your mind."

Researchers have also also reported increased optimism among adolescents following participation in a school-based mindfulness program (Schonert-Reichl, & Stewart Lawlor, 2010). These researchers found that compared to a control group, participants showed significant increases in their level of optimism from pre-test to post-test.

In thinking about what affected the participants' outlook to improve, it appears that seeing things from a different perspective was a contributing factor. For example, Lily stated that

mindfulness had helped “learning to not focus on the bad” and Beth described how she was able to view situations from perspectives other than her own:

I bought a fish and, for some reason, that calmed me. I got to like create its home and everything. Yeah, I’d just look at it and breathe and realize he’s happy in that little thing, so I might as well be happy.

Beth also articulated another meaningful example of looking for the good from difficult situations:

I don’t know. Even with the bad people in my life, I find a good thing. ‘Cause everyone says like my mom’s had, like, living with my mom and my stepdad was so bad. Okay, but they also taught me things from that “so bad” of a situation.

In using the word “taught” Beth suggested that she had made meaning of a difficult and complex situation, having interpreted her past in a way that helped her recognize the good aspects as well as the challenges. Tara also reflected on this idea rather eloquently, emphasizing how an underlying sense of optimism fuels her future:

If I look back on something I’ve done I can say, yeah, I’m okay with what I did. It’s not like I hurt someone and I’m guilty about it. ‘Cause even if it’s something little, after that kind of stuff builds up and it bothers you and it shapes the world that you create for yourself.

Optimism aligns with the emerging discussion about how vulnerable youth can be assisted to envision possibilities for the future (Abrams, 2011; Abrams & Hyun, 2009; Osyerman, Terry, & Bybee, 2002; Sipsma, Ickovics, Lin, & Kershaw, 2012), or the notion of possible selves/identities (Osyerman & James, 2011; Osyerman, Terry, & Bybee, 2002).

According to Osyerman, Terry, and Bybee (2002), possible selves are images/thoughts/ideas in a person's mind about what they might achieve in the future or become as an adult. Youth create possible selves by combining what they know about themselves now with what they know about what is needed to become what they imagine. It is the beliefs and ideas about one's possible selves that provide the crucial component encouraging individuals to move towards future imaginings of one's life. For instance, Osyerman, Terry and Bybee (2002) used activities-based methods to enhance youths' abilities to imagine and construct positive and improved school experiences, while teaching strategies to make those outcomes possible. Similarly, Aronowitz (2005) found that the social process of imagining the future was instrumental in the process of developing resilience among at-risk youth. Along these lines, it was anticipated that mindfulness may be a method by which participants could be assisted to, by relating to their own feelings in a different way, develop a more positive and healthy self-image, and to develop realistic hopes for the future. Results from the current study seem to support this rationale. For instance, Alison stated that she better controlled how she viewed ongoing strife at home and in school after the group experience: "It [mindfulness] has just sort of helped me figure shit out. Not completely, but better. I've got a different way of looking at things, basically. I look at things from my point of view." By asserting that she had a "different way" suggests that she was aware that multiple viewpoints exist and one chooses how best to respond. Moreover, George explained how he looks for new details in the situations he faces: "there's always something new you can always see in something." Likewise, Tara speculated about the benefits youth would receive from additional mindfulness training in schools:

It [mindfulness] was really helpful for me and it would be interesting if schools or there was a program that youth could get enrolled in, even if just for like a couple weeks, just to really kind of think about it and get interested in it because it really helped me learn a little bit about myself and that has caused me to take a different view on my life, and things that I do, and how it impacts other people as well. So, it's an interesting lesson.

As Barton (2005) suggested, opportunities for people to imagine themselves more positively can provide the inspiration to make choices to develop personal skills that bring about those images.

So, experiencing a change in mindset by recognizing that choices existed regarding one's perspective demonstrates again how participants integrated newly acquired self-awareness; first distinguishing between internal thoughts and feelings, and then choosing how to respond/react to those feelings in more constructive and helpful ways. The concept of 'beginner's mind' was especially helpful for Ian who described how it helped him modify his perspective:

Ian - It [mindfulness] can help me. It can kind of change my perspective a little bit in a probably helpful way. It can just like change my perspective and see things differently.

Sean - Are there any parts of the group, any activities we did, any concepts we talked about, any skills we learned that you've kept in your life?

Ian - The beginner's mind one I kept. It was really interesting. It really shifted your perspective like probably the most.

Beginner's mind is the lesson that when doing anything, treat it as though you are experiencing it for the first time (Bishop et al., 2004). Reflecting on Ian's comments, it could be that beginner's

mind had the impact it did because it encouraged the practice of reflection, creating the conditions to examine and render more joy from our experiences. This also resonated with George who, when asked how he would explain mindfulness to someone else, brought forward the activity of mindful eating: “I’d bring some sort of food and tell them to pay attention to beginner’s mind, experiencing something as if it was their first time.” The particularly vivid example of eating an ice cream cone that was read from a text during the group sessions resonated with the participants, and responses in the interviews following the group sessions supported the application of the concept elsewhere. For instance, George described using this concept to help cultivate increased appreciation:

When I’m playing music, I’m playing with a beginner’s mind, and I’ve got beginner’s mind, ‘cause there’s a lot of times when you go in and you’re playing but nothing comes right and you can’t create anything. There’s just nothing there. When you come back with a beginner’s mind and start fresh, and you finally get something, you feel a helluva lot better.

It was encouraging to see the participants integrate mindfulness outside of the group sessions. This was also the case for another participant who relayed the importance of mindfulness to her ability to fall asleep more easily and experience better quality of sleep.

Sleep hygiene. One final outcome of learning to be mindful was improved sleep hygiene. Sleep hygiene denotes the biological, behavioural, and environmental influences that can be changed to improve quality of sleep (Stepanski & Wyatt, 2003). The term was first discussed in the context of recommendations for patients living with insomnia that generally focused on promoting improved sleep patterns while raising awareness about relevant problematic factors such as caffeine or alcohol (Hauri, 1991). The field then broadened to emphasize other

behavioural factors such as the positive influence of napping and elimination of cognitive stimuli such as having a clock in one's room (Hauri, 1991). It is common for youth experiencing anxiety to have problems falling and/or staying asleep (Roberts, Roberts, & Chen, 2002). Among foster children, having a short duration of sleep has been linked to increased hyperactivity and inattention (Tininenko, Fisher, Bruce, & Pears, 2010). Conversely, among related benefits such as emotion regulation, one school-based mindfulness implementation has been associated with improved sleep hygiene (Sibinga et al., 2013). Thus, it was encouraging to find similar results in the current study. Though not reported by all participants, these results were interesting given the importance of sleep in general for teenagers in late adolescence, and the reported difficulty experienced with sleeping prior to participating in the group experience.

One participant in particular relayed how the breathing exercises that she learned during the group contributed to improved sleep hygiene. Lily stated that thinking about the group became part of a night-time routine and reminded her to practice mindful breathing exercises: "I usually try and do it when I'm going to bed." She later described her process of falling asleep as "easier", which was especially important to her given earlier difficulty:

One of those people that when they try to sleep, just everything... Just try to do the same thing in my head all at once. It's just, you know, counting, reciting the alphabet, you know? I'm trying to figure out that math question [I] just couldn't get.

This finding is consistent with previous literature identifying a reduction in sleep latency (the time between the decision to go to sleep and sleep onset) among older adults practicing mindfulness meditation (Morone, Lynch, Greco, Tindle, & Weiner, 2008). Though there exists a need to explore this more thoroughly among adolescents and specifically with youth

transitioning out of foster care, researchers have previously demonstrated that mindfulness predicted better sleep quality among adults in part by providing individuals with the skills to cognitively reframe the dysfunctional beliefs that preceded sleep for those experiencing anxiety (Howell, Digdon, & Buro, 2010; Ong, Shapiro, & Manber, 2008).

Summary of Group Discussion about the Group Program

Approximately one year after the group sessions were completed, the participants were invited to participate in a follow-up group discussion, the primary purpose of which was to share the analysis of the data, and seek further feedback regarding their experience of learning mindfulness. It was encouraging that nearly a year following the end of the group sessions all of the participants participated. In addition to eating lunch together and experiencing the general camaraderie that followed a reunion of sorts, the group discussion included an overview of the research process (spoken lecture), a visual presentation of initial themes from the analysis (displayed on projector screen), a visual review of the art work that was produced during the group sessions (original art work displayed on the wall), and a survey-like activity intended to gather participants' feedback about the group activities (explained in detail below). The main goals of the day's events were to facilitate a fun and engaging follow-up to the group experience and to solicit feedback about their experience.

Specifically, I anticipated that the review of the art work and of all art-based activities would help identify those exercises that had resonated the most with the participants. Participants were given three different sets of stickers that corresponded with the categories listed in Table Three below. One set of stickers with a smiling face meant "most enjoyable"; one set of stickers with a light bulb meant "most useful," and another set of stickers with a rainbow indicated "most memorable." A complete list of activities from the sessions was posted on the wall and

participants were invited to affix their stickers to the activities that had resonated with them as most enjoyable, useful, and memorable, the results of which are summarized below.

Table 3.

Summary of Most Enjoyable, Useful, and Memorable Activities

Most enjoyable	Most useful	Most memorable
“Grumpy Bird” with Clay GOAL: to have fun and build group cohesion	Best medicine GOAL: to have fun; extoll benefits of laughter; build group cohesion Deep belly breathing GOAL: to practice focusing, observing and paying attention	Dream-work GOAL: to practice exploring/accepting thoughts and feelings
Quarter Game GOAL: to practice focusing and paying attention, have fun, and build group cohesion	Doodle draw GOAL: to develop comfort with the methods, have fun Paint 2 Music GOAL: to practice focusing, observing/exploring/accepting thoughts and feelings	Best medicine GOAL: to have fun; extoll benefits of laughter; build group cohesion
Best Medicine GOAL: to have fun; build group cohesion Collaborative paint GOAL: to practice focusing, observing/exploring/accepting thoughts and feelings, collaboration	Thought jar GOAL: to teach the concept of mindfulness; practicing focusing Feeling Inventory GOAL: to practice reflection	Thought Jar GOAL: to teach the concept of mindfulness; practice focusing Medicine ball GOAL: to focus attention, have fun, collaborate
Mindful eating GOAL: to practice focusing, observing/exploring/accepting feelings, collaboration Egg drop GOAL: to have fun, practice collaboration	Listening for a minute GOAL: to teach the concept of mindfulness, practice observing using our senses. Mindful smelling GOAL: to practice focusing, observing/exploring/accepting thoughts and feelings, collaboration	Deep belly breathing GOAL: to focus attention, Mindful meditation with CD GOAL: to practice focusing, observing/exploring/accepting thoughts and feelings,

Where some activities are listed alongside another denotes how those activities received the same amount of stickers. The delineated columns represent the level of importance indicated by participants. Thus, activities listed at the top of each column received the most stickers. Also, the goal of each activity (beyond teaching mindfulness-based skills and concepts, and providing an opportunity to practice being mindful) is listed. Some of the activities shared common goals and features in how they were facilitated and this warrants further discussion. What follows next is a closer examination of what can be learned from the activities that the youth identified, as well as observations about how mindfulness was facilitated using arts-based methods.

The importance of practice. The intention of providing many opportunities for participants to practice being mindful was twofold: first, repeated opportunities to practice mindfulness inside the group could foster comfort with the methods thereby enhancing the willingness and confidence to practice being mindful away from the group. Second, repeated mindfulness practice coincided with the now more readily-accepted view that humans can change the ways they have coped and that much of our understanding of this process can be traced to the brain's ability to reorganize itself; a process in itself strengthened through repeated practice of more helpful solutions in a supportive environment (Kass & Trantham, 2014). Kass and Trantham (2014) contended that for individuals unwilling to engage in more traditionally-accepted talk therapies, "bottom-up" (p. 305) experiential learning is a promising helping approach.

Since many of the activities listed in Table Three were repeated in different group sessions, it can be anticipated that repeated opportunities to practice were helpful in teaching mindfulness with this population. Indeed, repeating exercises and lengthening the practice periods over time were also recommendations for adapting mindfulness activities for younger

audiences (Thompson, & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008). These authors also underlined that teaching mindfulness with non-adult populations should include an emphasis on explanation paired with more traditional experiential means since a group of adolescents may not connect why sitting in a room with one's eyes closed may be useful to their lives outside of the group. As such, deep breathing activities and activities that invited participants to focus on the breath (mindful meditation, mindful smelling, deep belly breathing, and best medicine), and were prefaced by a purposeful explanation as to its connection with mindful practice, were repeated in nearly every group and are well-represented in Table 3. Siegal (2007) stated that with repetitive practice being mindful can transform the experience of mindfulness from a passing state to a long-term trait of the individual.

In order to foster mindful practice away from the group, care was also taken to determine the type of activities that can be “anchored” outside the group setting. Anchoring refers to the type of metaphors, concepts or teachings about mindfulness that can be represented by way of simple objects that are created in the context of the group and transported home with participants, reminding them of the positive experience, and metaphor. This was an effort to respond to the limitation of any time-limited intervention. As Thich Nhat Hanh (2011) reminded us, there exists in each person a “seed of mindfulness, but we forget to water it” (p. 16). Teaching skills in the group and anchoring those activities outside of the group was one way of prompting participants to water their seeds. In the same way that Malekoff (2014) recommended devolving authority and rotating power to group members, I sought to build ownership in this process by continually canvassing the youth to learn what they had enjoyed and why. This continuous assessment reflected to participants the value of their opinions and gave them a sense of autonomy in the group process, something (lack of autonomy) participants described as

central to the challenges of being system-involved. I learned that as participants developed competency around the use of the activity within the group that they would feel comfortable and confident to repeat the activity, self-directed, outside of the group.

Feedback received from participants in the follow up group discussion supported that the activities that could be replicated outside of the group sessions resonated the most. Lily, for example, reported she was able to implement the activities outside of the group: “all of the activities are really easy to do but they’re like super easy. Just sit down, 10 minutes, how am I feeling right now?” Likewise, Beth made the link that the activities were accessible because they extended and built on existing skills: “it wasn’t totally new ‘cause we all knew how to draw, and it was stuff we already knew [how to do].” Thus, opportunities for practice outside of the group were important to these participants. This is important in terms of learning what activities to include while structuring a meaningful, relevant intervention for youth transitioning out of foster care. This finding coincided with previous research that demonstrated a significant improvement in mindfulness measures among participants that practiced the most outside of the formal teaching setting (Huppert & Johnson, 2010).

One of the activities that generated several responses along these lines and appeared twice during the survey was the “Thought Jar” (Coholic, 2010). Briefly, the Thought Jar was an activity facilitated in one of the first group sessions that uses the metaphor of a busy, distracted mind. Using effective metaphors was a recommendation adopted from previous research around the adaptation of teaching mindfulness to non-adults, and based upon earlier experiences (Coholic, Eys, & Loughheed, 2012; Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008). The Thought Jar appeared to be particularly meaningful for these participants because they were at an age where, with mindfulness, they became more aware of how distracted and/or preoccupied their minds

really were. Certainly, repeating the exercise during the beginning of most sessions, and referring to the group's jar (located on the table during each group) while referencing the busy mind metaphor during group discussion probably helped to emphasize the activity's purpose and relevance. Tara suggested she would use the Thought Jar to teach mindfulness to others: "The Thought Jar, I think, is really a good one cause it does really explain a lot of things" while many other participants such as Lily recounted having held onto their jar, providing a visual reminder of the group in another setting: "It's sitting on my windowsill". Likewise, George explained that he was also reminded to consider the group when visually cued:

Well, I still have my jar sitting in my room with a little crab on top with the magnet, and every time I see that, I'll think about it. Usually, if I see that in the morning, I'll think to myself, try to have a more mindful day and really try to enjoy myself.

By anchoring the activity in the participants' lives outside of the group, participants may have been reminded of the group and their own learning even after the sessions had ended. Many of the activities lent themselves to this strategy. Participants also grew snap peas (planted as a group activity and taken home to grow) during the course of the group sessions. Likewise, in one experiential "homework" assignment, participants were encouraged to practice mindful walking and bring collected items to the following group. These items (shells, small stones) were used to build fridge magnets, and sent home with participants as a visual reminder of the activity and group experience.

Correspondingly, researchers in the field of resilience studying maltreated children are now paying closer attention to the design and evaluation of quality interventions (Ungar, 2013), contributing to growing awareness about the major influence of structural changes in an abused

child's environment. In support of the way the current study tailored the activities of the group to the participants, the latest strategies for fostering resilience contend that interventions matter the most (in terms of benefit) to those who have experienced maltreatment, rather than diffused community-wide. Ungar (2013) also pointed out the need for a flexible delivery, for example after school and assisted by transportation, as was the case in the current study, in order to reach these young people.

Collaboration. Collaborative activities were well received, which is unsurprising given the findings related to social support expounded upon in the previous chapter. Participants identified that seeking/receiving support from others was integral to their view of resilience. This aligns with the fundamental view in strengths-based group work that people have much to offer one another to improve the quality of their lives (Malekoff, 2014). Malekoff (2014) wrote that promoting interaction among group members through facilitated creative expression can unlock the power of mutual aid and prevent isolation. Accordingly, it was clear that the participants enjoyed the experience in large part due its format as a group rather than individualized intervention, emphasizing in their view of resilience the importance of our social interactions as important sources of individual strength, healing and growth. It is apparent that participants were able to access social support through the group experience. This coincides with what researchers are now calling the importance of interdependence, acknowledging the need for opportunities to establish a wide array of supportive relationships, having rightly anticipated the deficits that can result from earlier relationship breakdown (Propp, Ortega, & NewHart, 2003). The programs that focus solely on skills related to self-sufficiency in preparation for independent living ignore the emotional scars and challenges of maltreated youth. Helping interventions, in particular mindfulness and arts-based methods, can promote healing by creating and strengthening healthy

relationships that may otherwise be missing in the lives of youth transitioning out of foster care (Antle, Johnson, Barbee, & Sullivan, 2009).

The group experience helped foster interdependence by creating the opportunity to foster supportive relationships with two adult helping professionals, and a sense of belonging with peers. By this point in their lives, many youth transitioning out of foster care, including two participants within this study, had been exposed to multiple foster home placements in different communities. As a result, these youth endured the loss of some relationships and incurred the stigma that accompanies the label of being system-involved and “in care.” The opportunity to share with their peers helped ameliorate associated stigma because their experiences were normalized. One of the ways that I observed this to happen was through the use of humour, which is subject to consideration below.

Promoting humour and enjoyment of activities. Humour is a multi-faceted concept and there has been much debate surrounding its complexity (Robinson, 1990; Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield, & Booth-Butterfield, 2005). The intent here is to point to the apparent benefit of its intentional use within the group facilitation of activities, as a way to successfully teach mindfulness to youth transitioning out of foster care. Across several definitions, researchers have tended to focus on a cognitive element that allows an individual to determine the context of something funny, an emotional motivation to come to the conclusion that something is funny, and the behavioural expression of humour, which is often laughter (Martin, 2007). Along these lines, in the current study, humour refers to the shared experience of laughter, fun and irony that was experienced among participants during the group process. I openly promoted the intentional use of humour by speaking about the benefits from a physiological viewpoint, facilitating activities that encouraged laughter and encouraging opportunities for participants to bond

appropriately through mutual story-telling. The art-based activities identified in Table 3 support the assumption that humour played an important role in the way mindfulness was taught. Using humour alongside mindfulness appears to be an effective way of teaching the fundamentals of mindfulness to adolescents. Indeed, it is without surprise that many of the activities listed in Table 3 involved laughter (best medicine, egg drop, grumpy bird), mediated through the sharing of experiences between participants.

While humour is often not the focus of serious consideration in the helping process, it has often been promoted in the healing work among trauma survivors by way of helping to point out the irrationality of unhelpful beliefs (Garrick, 2006). Kass and Trantham (2014) have also pointed to the ability of the body through laughter to facilitate emotional expression and relieve tension. Furthermore, there is some initial support for incorporating humour within the mindfulness literature. O'Brien (2013) reported promising results having explored the combined use of humour in clinical debriefing among nursing students alongside mindfulness meditation to amplify adaptive coping to anxiety. Similarly, Carson and Langer (2006) advocated for combining humour with mindfulness, pointing out that mindfulness increases the likelihood of individuals noticing aspects of themselves, and humour increasing the likelihood of their acceptance. This is because both mindfulness and humour rely on seeing things from a new, often unknown, perspective. It would seem to me that curiosity also plays an important role in the playfulness encouraged in mindfulness practice while observing and noticing experience, and connecting to the larger world/universe around us. This is akin to the anticipation of the unknown punchline while listening to a good joke.

In my experience, youth in foster care are often extremely quick-witted and amenable to the use of humour in the helping relationship. I draw the parallel to the effective use of humour

and story-telling among Aboriginal people for coping with, and healing from, the effects of intergenerational trauma (Lauw, Spangaro, Herring, & McNamara, 2013). What stands out in the integration of humour with story-telling is how the process gives voice to those who have been marginalized. The use of humour/experience of fun also extends the findings from the previous chapter that described the group, in its provision of social support, as being perceived as safe, inclusive and fun. Moreover, this observation reinforces the notion that having fun likely increases engagement as observed by all of the participants showing up for a follow up group discussion a year after the groups had ended.

Summary

In this chapter, I have explicated the participants' understanding of mindfulness before and after their group experience, and described the benefits that participants related from learning to be mindful. Additionally, in this chapter, I summarized the content from the follow-up group discussion that was facilitated a year after the end of the group sessions in an effort to present some of the initial findings from the analysis and to gather specific feedback about their experience of the group activities. Not surprisingly, how participants described mindfulness evolved following group participation, which was encouraging because it demonstrated that participants were able to apply the concepts that they had learned outside the context of the group itself to fortify existing coping strategies. I also included a summary of the activities that resonated most with participants after the group sessions had ended in this chapter, providing insight into why some activities were regarded as more helpful than others. Next, in the final chapter, I summarize some ideas about the study's research questions, underline the limitations of the current study, discuss the implications of the findings, and recommend areas for future research.

Chapter Six

Conclusions

Despite the reported benefits of mindfulness for youth, relatively little attention has been dedicated to the study of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) for marginalized youth, for example, youth transitioning out of foster care due to their age. Until the current study, to the best of my knowledge, no researchers have reported the implementation of an innovative MBI with these youth despite the financial and moral benefit to society of supporting youth with early and preventative strategies. Conversely, inaction contributes to increased societal costs and a higher emotional burden on these youth (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2013; Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, 2012). As this study supported, youth transitioning out of foster care face the same normative pressures of adolescence with less emotional and social support than their peers, and with the added burden of involvement in the child welfare system. As such, these young people face a myriad of short and long-term challenges related to their personal well-being, their health, and education. Understandably, researchers and child advocates across many provinces have called for strength-based interventions to develop the resilience of youth in care (Contenta, Monsebraaten, & Rankin, 2014; Representative for Children and Youth, 2014).

While there has always been a great deal of interest in the study of resilience, only recently has attention been given to considering how marginalized youth experience/understand the concept. For example, what has been considered “resilient” according to a young person (e.g., stealing food in a foster home setting) may be considered “maladaptive” by an authority figure, but entirely “normal” and effective if that youth previously faced food insecurity. Previously, researchers had identified the major barriers facing youth transitioning out of foster

care such as a lack of supportive relationships, educational challenges, housing instability and underemployment (Dewar & Goodman, 2014). Similarly, this study illuminated some of the unique struggles that a small group of youth transitioning out of foster care experienced and provided insight into the complexity of “doing well” amid adversity. Challenges were discussed in the present study and confirmed the relevance (to these participants) of a broader understanding of resilience: the ability of youth to navigate and negotiate with their communities for the resources they need to sustain themselves (Ungar, 2008). Findings from this research helped confirm factors that influence a broader relational understanding of resilience.

Excitedly, mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) represent a promising practice among young people (Tan, 2015). In my experience being part of a research team facilitating MBIs with latency-aged children in care, I observed these children to have experiences in the group setting (such as having access to supportive relationships and positively contributing to their sense of identity) that align with a broader social understanding of resilience. Yet, within the nascent literature surrounding mindfulness with young people, few studies have focused on the feasibility of MBIs among marginalized young people. These youth face challenges that require more holistic and creative ways to learn and practice mindfulness that may foster the development of resilience. This was also one of the first studies to explore a broader social and ecological understanding of resilience with youth transitioning out of foster care in the hopes of delineating links (if any) between the concepts of mindfulness and resilience.

On this basis of the empirical gaps in the literature exploring the feasibility of MBIs with youth transitioning out of foster care, resilience research from the perspectives of marginalized youth, and clinical gaps in the current availability of strength-based interventions for this population, my initial research questions sought to explore:

- How are arts-based mindfulness interventions suitable, feasible, and beneficial (if at all) for youth transitioning out of foster care?
- How do these youth understand resilience and mindfulness?
- What are the youths' experiences of participating in an arts-based mindfulness program?
- What were the youths' experiences of learning mindfulness?
- What connections can be made between learning mindfulness and developing resilience?

In this concluding chapter, I provide a synopsis of the current study including a review of the study's purpose, its central findings, and the implications of these findings for policy makers, service providers, and future researchers. I also outline the limitations of the study and provide recommendations for future research.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current study was to explore the usefulness and benefits of an arts and mindfulness-based group for youth transitioning out of foster care, and the intersections between mindfulness and resilience. My aim was to generate new knowledge about the use of MBIs among youth transitioning out of foster care, thereby responding to urgent calls to support a particularly vulnerable group of young adults on the verge of exiting the child welfare system due to their age. Additionally, I hoped to provide some practical guidance surrounding program implementation for adults involved with youth in the child welfare system.

This study, unique in its implementation of an innovative MBI for youth transitioning out of foster care, included five research questions, each dealing with different aspects of the inquiry. Through the course of this research, new insights have been gained that help answer these

questions and generate new knowledge about an underrepresented population in an expanding field of research and practice. A review of these findings has yielded implications for different groups involved with the care of young people in the child welfare system, namely, policy makers, service providers, and other supportive adults and peers (kin and non-kin). For instance, this study has contributed to an emerging conversation about the distinct challenges facing youth transitioning out of foster care, and the importance of social and emotional support during the aging out process (Adly & Jupp Kina, 2015). Additionally, we also know more about facilitating unique mindfulness-based interventions with marginalized youth. We have also gathered valuable information regarding how these youth understand the concepts of mindfulness and resilience and their potential intersections. In order to summarize what has been learned, I review each question and the findings associated with each. Where relevant, I have outlined the implications of these findings.

How are Arts-Based Mindfulness Interventions Suitable, Feasible, and Beneficial (if at all) for Youth Transitioning out of Foster Care?

The primary research question assessed three aspects (the suitability, feasibility, and benefits) of an innovative MBI for youth transitioning out of foster care. First, findings from the current study supported the suitability of an arts-based MBI for youth transitioning out of foster care, based on the regular attendance and high levels of engagement with the activities. Additionally, few difficulties were encountered in arranging pre- and post-interviews where participants discussed the helpfulness of the intervention. Moreover, all of the participants chose to attend a voluntary follow-up meeting a year after the group sessions had ended. On the other hand, the overall number of participants was small and attrition was experienced by two older males in the boys' group (this is examined more closely later in the chapter and

recommendations are provided). Together, these observations reflect the apparent suitability of using arts-based methods to teach mindfulness as an alternative and more holistic approach to MBIs facilitated with youth. Until now, most of the research involving mindfulness and adolescence has not focused on working with young people dealing with the kinds of challenging circumstances that hinder involvement in a helping process. Yet, we know that the need to provide meaningful support that meets physical, emotional, mental, cultural, and spiritual needs is paramount for youth to be successful and healthy as they enter adulthood.

The importance of providing holistic approaches in general is receiving increasing attention though the rationale is straightforward, if not intuitive, and has been around for decades (Magnusson, 1995; Sulmasy, 2002). In response to a recent upsurge in interest, Skinner (2014) recently restated the need to expand the bio-psycho-social conceptualization of recovery in mental health to include cultural and spiritual dimensions in order to properly understand well-being. The essential message from the current study is similar: that the complexity of lives interrupted by trauma, loss and child welfare system involvement requires a meaningful and comprehensive approach. This study helped confirm the use of arts-based mindfulness activities as a holistic approach for working with vulnerable youth. However, a question of particular interest emerging at this juncture is to what degree were the arts-based mindfulness methods within the group responsible for the participants' engagement versus the apparent importance of the group process itself? Admittedly, these are difficult threads to tease apart. From a practical standpoint, in the absence of a robust array of interventions designed for this population, and notoriously low levels of engagement by these youth, helping/health professionals might do well to focus on the positive impact of strength-based group work.

Group work is a term used to describe a process where individuals voluntarily engage in personal and social development through voluntary group association often leading to other socially-desirable outcomes (Malekoff, 2014). My use of the term “strengths-based group work” denotes an integration of strengths-based principles into group work; many of which are rooted in child and youth care practice. In the current study, the principles of CYC practice that were embedded in the group format itself included collaboration in the activities and the development of “client-centered” group methods that met these youth “where they were”, thereby complementing their abilities. It was my view that while learning new skills related to mindfulness, the participants needed to be “set up for success”, and to have fun, in order to remain engaged in the process. The purposeful use of strength-based group work is akin to the deliberative use of social group work methodology discussed elsewhere (Coholic, Ostrick, Posteraro, & Loughheed, in press). Briefly, social group work refers to a process that views group work as unique, where each group, based on the abilities of its members, generates its own experiences and works through its own challenges, in its own way. It considers this process vital rather than embracing a singular focus on the content of the intervention or curriculum utilized in the group (Malekoff, 2007; Galinsky, Terzian, & Fraser, 2006). Additionally, I share the view, that group processes are more than a vehicle for the curriculum (Drumm, 2006). As such, facilitators should remain cognizant of how each person in the group (including themselves) influences the dynamics of the group (Collins, 2006).

The group in the current study was in line with social group work methodology (Drumm, 2006). For example, we allowed the group to develop based on the felt needs of the participants, and ensured the participants experienced a safe space to share their views. We consciously focused on opportunities for enhanced collaboration and inclusion among the participants. We

highlighted opportunities for participants to explore their own unique abilities. In many instances, we became familiar with various art supplies that each participant enjoyed and built in additional activities that utilized those mediums. We fostered mutual aid in the group sessions by promoting acceptance and support amongst all participants (Collins, 2006), encouraging the youth to lead the activities they particularly enjoyed or share advice with the other group members on how to practice the activities (e.g., sharing ideas about their posture while breathing deeply).

In support of strength-based group work, Ungar, Liebenberg and Ikeda (2012) previously highlighted that although some attempts to support youth may be slow to change personal deficits such as disordered thoughts, feelings, or behaviour, the implementation of group interventions may simultaneously mitigate the course of illness by promoting positive aspects of resilience like personal growth, identity, and a sense of control. In a similar vein, Ungar, Liebenberg, and Ikeda (2014) outlined an important principle of effective service design: providing continuous and coordinated services. These researchers suggested that for youth identified as requiring resources in one or more systems (e.g., education, criminal justice, child welfare), interventions should be tailored to their specific needs (determined according to their perspectives) and responsive enough to not only provide the intervention but also to access additional practical support as required. Given the time that can often elapse between assessment and service provision, service providers should recognize that the implementation of strength-based group work among older youth in care is a cost effective (I will say more about this next) strategy to mitigate feelings of stigma, isolation, self-blame, and ongoing marginalization. A group process that teaches new skills in a creative and enjoyable way can mitigate the course of illness and promote wellness in the absence of other service involvement (Ungar, Liebenberg, &

Ikeda, 2014). Furthermore, that the participants expressed having fun while attending this intervention is noteworthy given the need for youth to feel accepted in order to feel comfortable and engaged in a group process (Malekoff, 2014). Child welfare agencies that endorse this type of helping intervention can boost engagement with a population reluctant to engage yet most in need of support. A main contribution of this study is that it demonstrated the importance of strength-based group work that is consistent with a social group work methodology as a tool for the effective delivery of MBIs with marginalized youth. Indeed, the benefits of delivering mindfulness training in isolation from the mutual aid and social support offered in a group format are questionable if participants are not engaged and experiencing success with the methods.

For example, Jee et al. (2015) recently published a pilot study evaluating an MBI with youth in foster care. The absence of any details regarding the attention paid to the high needs of the participants in the formulation of the research design is obvious to me. While specific details regarding what the intervention entailed are not published, the article suggests the methods were based on a MBSR approach that was “widely studied among adult populations” (p. 7). The researchers described a two-hour session: one hour led by a psychologist who facilitated traditional MBSR activities, and one additional hour where participants ate food, socialized, listened to guest speakers, completed arts and crafts, and listened to music. There is no mention of the importance of using holistic, creative, or alternative approaches with traumatized youth. Furthermore, in an attempt to demonstrate the “effectiveness” of the MBI, groups included 12 members and were randomized. In general, in my experience, a group larger than six youth transitioning out of foster care makes it difficult for (no less than two) facilitators to consider the individual strengths and needs of group members. Furthermore, facilitators may be limited in

their ability to strategize about how to work with the potential dynamics of a larger group. In support of this concern, three participants in Jee et al.'s study who engaged in a physical altercation were prevented from further participation. Malekoff (2014) reminds us that a consequence of utilizing only evidence-based practices in the helping/health professions is that much of what is then called group work is actually "curriculum driven" (p. 36) classes that cannot deviate from predetermined scripts that facilitators must follow in order to preserve the methodological coherence from group to group. Unfortunately, amongst marginalized groups, this agenda flies in the face of what works in strengths-based group work that celebrates a much more flexible process that promotes creativity and belonging. In general, the pressure in the social sciences to conform research designs to this standard of evaluation hinders the development of promising practices among the marginalized groups that one could argue require supports and services the most. In response, researchers are now calling for a broader and more collaborative research process that refines research designs that minimize the complexities of conducting social science research (Gondolf, 2015).

Finally, while I do not doubt the altruistic intentions of Lee et al. (2015), I question the use of the language that labels youth in care as previously "noncompliant with treatment recommendations" (p. 3) that ignores the realities of youth who have become further marginalized after system involvement. In my view, options for marginalized youth are generally quite limited because most current interventions fail to consider the importance of engagement and the double-dose of stigma (of being involved in the child welfare system and mental health systems) that stifles engagement (Jee, Conn, Toth, Szilagyi, & Chin, 2014). So, while I value the cause and respect the energy and resources required to undertake research with this population, focusing too narrowly on both the content of the intervention and the goal of evaluating

“effectiveness” misses an opportunity to develop an intervention that underlines the important social and relational factors involved in group work with marginalized youth. As I stated earlier, developing a group intervention generated social support for its members, and was “effective” in teaching new skills about mindfulness to these youth. These are important contributions of the current study.

For service providers, this also brings up the importance of increased training opportunities for helping/health professionals for group work facilitation in order to strengthen agency capacity of group opportunities for marginalized youth. Currently, there is a resurgence of support for this type of training from researchers interested in fortifying a wider supportive community of helping/health professionals proficient in group work facilitation (Bergart & Clements, 2015; Rosenwald et al., 2013). Strength-based group work is often utilized in child and youth care (CYC) practice making its inclusion in professional training important since building and maintaining trust is such an important factor in creating relationships with and among youth (Curry, Lawler, Schneider-Munoz, & Fox, 2011). How and where these trained facilitators are deployed requires additional consideration. In response to the fragmentation of multiple services a youth may be involved with, it makes sense that helping/health professionals work interprofessionally, serving as a navigator in schools and community settings during the years leading up to and throughout the aging out process (Bright, Raghavan, Kliethermes, Juedemann, & Dunn, 2010). Trained facilitators would have the flexibility to work between the “silos” that often separate various helping/health professions that each work with youth in different capacities (Gillespie, Whiteley, Watts, Dattolo, & Jones, 2010). Child and youth care workers are well positioned to take up this work given the inherent flexibility of the profession to be where youth are.

Returning to the research question, regarding the feasibility of these methods, organizing and facilitating the groups proved to be very cost-effective (approximately \$75 per two groups) with food and rental costs for space being the primary expenses. It is acknowledged that there were key stakeholders that enabled the groups to take place without any additional financial burden. For example, food costs were significantly reduced with partial sponsorship from a local business owner. Furthermore, in the absence of a network of volunteer drivers for youth in care, the in-kind support of several foster parents facilitated transportation from school to the groups. Foster parents worked with each other's schedules, and with the youths' social workers and teachers to provide transportation to the group sessions. This speaks to the efforts that emerged in a rural context to overcome the geographic hurdles involved. It also reflected a strong level of commitment for an intervention that the youth had identified as important. Interestingly, this appeared to contribute to a sense of belonging in the group since participants ended up traveling together in the same vehicle. This was an organic experience that I did not plan for but is important to highlight nonetheless.

In Chapter Four, the challenge of feeling marginalized living in a small community was described and participants repeatedly discussed feeling a sense of belonging in the group. The in-kind transportation support, where participants enjoyed traveling together after school, helped to support the feasibility of this intervention. Additionally, the decision by the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) to ensure that one MCFD employee would co-facilitate the groups meant that I did not have to hire an additional group facilitator. Establishing the feasibility of this program has implications for addressing structural gaps in service provision that are experienced in rural communities, where population-based funding formulas, and the lack of agency capacity and existence of services, limits the availability of potentially helpful

interventions that in turn propels the need for a reliance on out of home placement (McGuinness, 2009). This remains an area of the research less understood in part because it remains easier to recruit and access larger numbers of participants for research projects in urban areas. This study stands as an example of research conducted with older youth in care living in a rural area. Those who make decisions regarding what programs “roll out” in rural areas of the child welfare system should look to the strengths within the community such as the provision of in-kind transportation evidenced in this study. One of the advantages of living in small communities is that everyone involved can meet in-person to work together, which bodes well for the establishment of integrated support networks. Furthermore, the provision of strengths-based programs that are non-pathologizing and focused on resilience is particularly important for marginalized youth in rural communities where stigma is difficult to escape. Capitalizing on such assets may increase program availability and lessen the demand for other services, especially later on in adulthood. Moreover, if we know that these youth can experience and develop resilience by way of social support, we have a responsibility to foster these types of opportunities for youths (such as the provision of strength-based group work).

These observations coincide with a recent review of the literature exposing barriers and best practices for child welfare agencies where the primary barrier associated with a successful transition to adulthood for these youth is a lack of supportive relationships (Dewar & Goodman, 2014). The researchers reminded us that “youth are at risk if they don’t develop and maintain long-term supportive relationships with adults” (p. 3) and admitted that strengthening these relationships requires a “sustained persistent process of engagement” (p. 7). Other researchers also discussed the implementation of interdependence and teaming practices, broadly referring to joint collaborative efforts between service providers, family, friends and any other important

adults for the purposes of “solidifying relationships, building supports, and creating plans for youth and young adults” (Raukis, Kerman, & Phillips, 2013, p. 108). Finally, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative (2013) report on cost avoidance outlined how effective service provision paired alongside “permanent relationships with responsible and caring adults” can lead to “tremendous return on investment” (p. 10). Without the group sessions, I question whether any of the adults in the lives of the participants (foster parents, child care workers, teachers) would have had a reason to cross paths with one another, despite the emerging focus on the importance of working together, aiming interventions across broad systems of support, and sharing views about the roles each plays in the lives of youth transitioning out of foster care (Blakeslee, 2015; Raukis, Kerman, & Phillips, 2013).

Policy makers then should rightfully consider expanding the narrow conceptualizations of resilience that underpin most ILS programs (e.g. self-determination, self-efficacy, self-reliance) and instead embed a broader relational focus that values and indeed applauds youths’ ability to connect and engage with range of supportive peers and adults. This study found that participants experience tension and stigma associated with asking for help, even though they articulated the benefits of experiencing/receiving social support. As evidenced in this study, I observed network cohesion between the MCFD staff, foster parents, teachers and me (researcher and group facilitator) and how this supported the feasibility of the group. The underlying tension/challenge is designing effective interventions that both teach youth practical independence strategies to prepare them for adulthood while also providing them with skills to make meaning of the events that necessitated child welfare involvement in the first place. This continues to be no small task; however, one could argue that a group of support persons who are more connected with each other may more efficiently pick up on cues signalling that an individual requires help. For other

youth transitioning out of foster care, experiencing strengths-based, collaborative experiences in group work as evidenced in the current study may render similar benefits like social support that appear to be critically important in avoiding isolation, the tendency to self-blame and not seek help following the experience of stigma. The growing awareness of the importance of connection and network cohesion are areas that may help reduce the burden associated with asking for help (Blakeslee, 2015; Noble-Carr, Barker, McArthur, & Woodman, 2014). Finally, I sought to explore the benefits of arts-based mindfulness methods for youth transitioning out of foster care. Participants described improved emotion regulation, optimism and better sleep hygiene. These benefits were regarded as important because they emerged over the course of the participants' involvement in the research process, and because of how applicable they were to assisting the participants with the challenges they voiced of being involved in, and transitioning away from, the child welfare system. For decision-makers within the child welfare system, research involving youth perspectives serve an important function in how interventions can be informed by youths' perspectives. As this study has helped to demonstrate, arts-based mindfulness group work represents a promising approach to fostering resilience.

How did the Youth Understand Resilience and Mindfulness?

Regarding the concept of resilience, rather than the familiar idea of “bouncing back”, participants discussed a mindset described as “going with the flow.” This idea was attributed to not focusing on the past or future (perhaps as a result of being repeatedly let down). Additionally, participants discussed the importance (to resilience) of being strong, referring to personal strength to endure challenging events, past and present, while acknowledging that resilience also included receiving support from others. Their ideas about resilience remained unchanged throughout participation in the research process, potentially revealing the powerful

influence of past experiences on their development and the limited impact of a single intervention on long-standing beliefs. These ideas were also reflected in the values that underpin current ILS programs.

Participants developed a more intimate understanding of mindfulness over the course of group participation. Admittedly, participants who voluntarily partook in the study had an existing understanding of mindfulness (and willingness to learn more). Participants revealed that the most relevant mechanisms of mindfulness included: increased self-awareness of thoughts and feelings, the role of their physical senses, and non-judgmental acceptance.

What are the Youths' Experiences of Participating in an Arts-Based Mindfulness Program?

This question explored the participants' descriptions of participating in an arts-based mindfulness program. The findings revealed that participants' experiences of participation mediated a type of social support that felt inclusive, safe and fun. This was important since participants described the role of support as one facet of their understanding of resilience. It was further confirmed a year later in a follow-up group discussion where participants underlined the importance of collaborative activities and having an enjoyable experience. The importance of these findings meant that participants were able to engage in the group and learn new skills, helping solidify the use of group work as a vehicle to engage these participants who may have been less likely to learn about mindfulness if not for its creative delivery in a group format.

What were the Youths' Experiences of Learning Mindfulness?

The findings helped expand our understanding of how youth with complex needs could learn mindfulness. At the beginning of the group experience, participants demonstrated some familiarity with the concept of mindfulness and were interested in learning more. I found that

participants were able to deepen their understanding over the course of the group sessions, describing with greater detail an awareness of their thoughts and feelings including being more attuned to the role of their senses, and an improved understanding of non-judgmental acceptance. This finding strengthens the use of arts-based methods as a way to help make the concepts of mindfulness accessible to young people that face the type of challenges that may prevent them from partaking in more traditional mindfulness delivery. Practicing mindfulness using arts-based methods that were highly experiential, flexible and fun, yielded benefits for the participants, and facilitated positive contributions to the broader relational factors supported by strengths-based group work. The participants felt comfortable participating in the activities and repeatedly used these opportunities to express themselves in a safe and inclusive environment. Furthermore, participants repeatedly stated how much fun they had participating. Again, this was an important finding related to their engagement in the group. In doing so, they were able to reap some of the benefits of learning to be mindful. Specifically, they became more self-aware of their thoughts and feelings, and experienced improved emotion regulation, and a sense of optimism.

What Connections can be Made Between Learning Mindfulness and Developing Resilience?

In the final question, I broadly inquired about the relationship between learning mindfulness and developing resilience among youth transitioning out of foster care. From the outset, it was theorized that there were links between the concepts that warranted further attention. Before this study, researchers discussed how mindfulness could improve various aspects of resilience and this study helped confirm three possible connections: (1) social support, (2) self-awareness, and (3) emotion regulation.

First, it was anticipated that learning mindfulness fostered experiences that could be correlated with an emergent ecological understanding of resilience: an understanding of resilience based on a person's interaction with the environment and the environment itself as more important than any individual qualities used to overcome adversity. Ungar et al. (2008) previously described tensions (multiple factors occurring simultaneously) in an important study about the factors responsible for developing resilience amongst vulnerable youth. Four of these factors in particular resonated with me as they emerged in the present study. For example, the findings supported that youth (a) developed positive relationships and (b) a sense of personal identity while (c) experiencing a meaningful role and (d) being part of something larger than one's self. Participation in the arts-based mindfulness group also fostered a concept known as social support, which participants experienced as inclusive, safe and fun, echoing Ungar et al.'s (2008) previous findings. Thus, the experience of social support was potentially one link between learning mindfulness in a group format and developing resilience; however, this requires further consideration. As previously discussed, it is possible (and even likely) that the purposeful attention to a group format tailored for these youth mediated the experience of social support. Thus, it is difficult to say outright that social support is a clear link between mindfulness and resilience, although, as I discussed earlier, the unique contribution of this study is the apparent importance of strengths-based group work that is creative, collaborative and engaging for youth transitioning out of foster care. Logistical and methodological challenges notwithstanding, further research examining group work with marginalized youth is obviously very important given how well-regarded the experience of social support was to youth in the current study. Child and youth care workers are well positioned to take up this work given the

tradition of collaborating with other disciplines in varied practice environments, wherever youth are (Charles & Garfat, 2009).

Second, I thought that by harnessing new skills in the course of learning mindfulness, such as developing new insight about their thoughts, and reducing the initial reactivity to troubling events, youth transitioning out of foster care might develop the confidence with the skills to start visualizing themselves “doing well.” This was based on the work of previous researchers who had described believing in the possibility of a positive outcome in order for that outcome to actually occur, a concept described as possible identities. Briefly, possible identities refer to future-oriented ideas about the outcomes that one will eventually experience (Oyserman & James, 2011). I anticipated that teaching new skills such as how to breathe in order to be calm, and how to observe rather than react to racing thoughts, would lead to new knowledge that would build feelings of confidence in using those new skills to help navigate relationships, reduce stress, and ultimately construct more positive future-based possible identities.

While I was not able to confirm that participants’ possible identities changed over the course of the study, I did find that learning and practicing mindfulness helped improve self-awareness of inner thoughts and feelings, and non-judgmental acceptance. Participants described the benefits of their mindful practice including improved emotion regulation, a heightened sense of optimism about their futures and, in the case of one participant, improved sleep hygiene. In turn, these benefits were important in terms of assisting participants to realize their goals. For example, participants related how improved emotion regulation represented a change in how they had previously dealt with distressing feelings, improving how they negotiated academic stress and difficult relationships. Thus, improved self-awareness and emotion regulation appear to be important links between learning mindfulness and developing resilience.

In summary, in this section, I have reviewed the findings of each research question and summarized their implications. In general, learning more about the views of these young people during the aging out process (e.g., the impact of child welfare system involvement, and the complexity of resilience) has the potential to broaden the understanding of foster parents and helping professionals providing support and services to these youth. For example, participants in this study discussed a distinctive constellation of challenges such as parentification, separation from biological family members, housing impermanence, academic pressure, and experiences of marginalization associated with being a youth in foster care. Importantly, I hope the dissemination of these findings contributes to the public awareness required to increase the visibility of marginalized youth. Listening to their views has the potential to create empathic interactions between youth transitioning out of foster care and supportive adults across the systems these young people are involved with. Adults involved in the care of these young people may expand their own understanding on the subject thereby further contextualizing the behaviours they see from young people. For the general public, this research raises our collective consciousness about the experiences of youth transitioning out of foster care and their perspectives about resilience, which is vital since public awareness is important to leveraging pressure on decision-makers to implement change (Vancouver Foundation, 2013). As researchers have pointed out, the cost of avoiding these challenges will only increase across the lifespan of these youth making early investment a more logical path forward (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2013). My hope is that service providers view arts-based mindfulness group work as a viable means of supporting youth. Additionally, I encourage researchers to continue to take up further research despite the challenges of facilitating research with marginalized populations that often leaves youth perspectives underrepresented in research,

policy, and program development. In the final section, I will outline the limitations of the current research and recommend areas of further study.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

In general, qualitative research is a lengthy and time-consuming pursuit. In order to facilitate two research groups before participants' academic summer break, I recruited participants for two groups in total. Thus, the main limitation of the study is having had a small voluntary group of participants; specifically, a small number of older male participants. This led to a missed opportunity in developing a more comprehensive understanding of how this research program may (if at all) assist older male youth transitioning out of foster care. I will now discuss this limitation and the accompanying challenges further, providing suggestions about how researchers may continue this important research in the future.

Due to attrition of two male participants, the study concluded with eight participants. This in itself makes it difficult to generalize findings to other youth transitioning out of foster care. Although generalizability was not the primary goal of the study, a larger group of participants may have increased the diversity in responses to the interview questions. Efforts to increase the number of participants were constrained by the logistical considerations of facilitating small groups, and the availability of participants in this particular catchment region. It was admittedly difficult to recruit young men to the group. Overall, there were less male (as compared to female) youth transitioning out of foster care living in the area and although several additional males were contacted about prospective participation in the study, the primary reason stated for male non-participation included a lack of time due to employment obligations. One additional older male youth expressed interest in attending but was unable to arrive at the first and second group sessions due to upheaval in his personal life. A larger group of participants

could be achieved by broadening the catchment area or focusing on youth living in urban areas. Additionally, the challenge of recruiting male youth has broader implications for future research.

The issue of male youth and attrition raise important questions about the suitability of these methods with older males. There is a paucity of research exploring this issue among males participating in arts-based group work. In one study, Nsonwu, Dennison, and Long (2015) conducted an arts-based intervention among older youth in care, without any attrition, however, like the current study, participants were predominantly female (8 females and 2 males). It may be that the use of arts-based methods appeals to some youth more than others but a broader understanding of the gender roles and expectations placed on older male youth in care is required to critically evaluate this issue.

In general, researchers conducting studies with youth in foster care experience higher rates of attrition (Jackson, Gabrielli, Tunno, & Hambrick, 2012). To this end, researchers have identified that internal trauma symptoms such as avoidance make engaging in processes that involve facing and processing difficult feelings and memories very challenging (Schneider, Grilli, & Schneider, 2013). Furthermore, working with young males in groups is difficult because the message of working collaboratively in groups runs counter to the directive of independence many young males grow up with. Haen (2011, p. 19) stated that the expression of gender, “particularly in adolescence, can be likened to a theatrical performance of the playing of a game in which roles are taken on and enacted, discarded, or incorporated as boys move through varying social situations.”

Unfortunately, based on the voluntary nature of the study, I did not ascertain the reasons for non-participation. However, my understanding after contacting the prospective male participants at the forefront of the study was that many older youth consider themselves having

already “aged out” of a system prior to age 18 years, and are more interested in “moving on” with their lives. This was supported in discussion with an MCFD social worker who recalled that two males had declined participation citing part-time employment as the reason. One youth had added that he would not participate in anything related to him identifying as a “youth in care.” This is unsurprising given the experiences of marginalization that the participants expressed. Youth transitioning out of foster care receive conflicting messages from care providers in the sense that they are encouraged to reach out for support, yet remain inundated with the underlying message that they need to learn to be independent. In Chapter Four, I suggested that one of the reasons for this tension may include the idea that the youth reflected messages they received through Independent Living Skills (ILS) programs and in mainstream society that praises self-reliance and independence. Participants delicately negotiated decisions about seeking assistance. They described feeling torn by wanting to resolve challenges on their own while acknowledging the importance of asking for help. Perhaps this experience is magnified for young males. Indeed, this is consistent with the reality that males are less likely to ask for help than females, and less likely to engage in a helping process (Bell, Breland, & Ott, 2013).

To this end, I question whether the male youth who were approached about the study truly felt as though they could take part without experiencing the negative implications of that participation being known by others (such as their peers, for example). I am inclined to suggest that the question of how much males are interested in mindfulness and/or arts-based methods may be a “red herring” if not properly considered in the context of gender roles and expectations experienced by the youth being recruited for the study. In my experience in this research, the two male youth that did participate appeared to thoroughly enjoy learning mindfulness, engage with arts-based methods, and partake in a strengths-based group. Endeavouring to recruit more males

to this type of intervention then requires continued careful consideration of broader social factors at play such as prevailing beliefs about traditional masculinity and how the mainstream media reinforces these ideas.

With regards to recruiting more males into programs, the first recommendation would be to offer mindfulness arts-based group work to younger males aged 14-16 years, prior to their anticipated entry into the workforce. Future studies may also benefit from implementing snowball sampling as a way for males involved in the research to recruit their peers. Indeed, Lee et al. (2015) have correctly highlighted the importance of future research that focuses on younger children in care and their level of engagement in helping interventions. However, based on the original rationale of the current study, it is also important to include older youth in care in future research. Admittedly, the methods in the current study may require additional modifications to make them increasingly relevant to older males, for example, developing activities that focus on movement, play and/or adventure-based themes. There is, for example, emerging research discussing the benefits of yoga among youth (Cook-Cottone, 2015; Frank, Bose, & Schrobenauser-Clonan, 2014; Klatt, Harpster, Browne, White, & Case-Smith, 2013). There are also other emerging examples of mindfulness practice blended with other creative modalities such as martial arts that may positively engage males in mindfulness practice (Milligan, Badali, & Spiroiu, 2015). One example in particular is a study that found a mindfulness curriculum blended with adventure-based physical activities in a recreational group setting was positively received by youth from military families who struggled with issues similar to youth transitioning out of foster care (Le, 2014). Based on my background as a child and youth care worker and my prevailing interest/experience in incorporating the purposeful use of adventure experiences with mental health treatment, I am particularly interested in furthering this type of exploration by

developing a hybrid mindfulness and art-based group that merges physical activities as the primary experiential component with art-based activities that serve as tools for reflection.

There is early support for this approach as researchers are beginning to examine the relationship between adventure therapy and mindfulness practice in a residential treatment setting (Russell, Heppner, & Gillis, 2014) and in community-based mental health service delivery (Tucker, Javorski, Tracy, & Beale, 2013). Nichols and Gray (2007) contended that being still in a wilderness setting can facilitate mindful experiences for youth with complex needs; however, in order to unlock the transformative potential of these experiences, facilitators must first establish trust and engage willing participants when their motivation is high. I can attest from my own involvement facilitating adventure experiences that this process often involves a series of activities that participants actively progress through. One central challenge in further exploration then is the need to examine and clarify the role of each of the unique variables (alongside the role of wilderness/nature) involved in this type of experience for youth: including the experience of fun, group work, the challenge of the activities, the use of arts-based methods, the novel experience as a whole, and the role of the facilitators to name a few examples. What can be said with certainty is researchers must take care to ensure that all interventions are carefully designed to meet the unique challenges experienced by youth who have faced trauma (Schneider, Grilli, & Schneider, 2013).

In hindsight, a second limitation of concern related to the small number of participants in the current study was an overly narrow focus within the data collection strategy. Emphasis in the study was placed on seeking to understand the perspectives of youth transitioning out of foster care. In doing so, I rightly focused on working with the MCFD to locate youth interested in participating in the study. However, in order to better anticipate attrition among smaller groups

of participants, future researchers could gather supporting evidence through additional interview data or questionnaires from foster parents, teachers, peers, and child care workers who may have been able to provide additional observations about how the participants practiced mindfulness away from the group and any other perceived changes in the participants' behaviours. An additional strategy may be to include art that the participants had created in the interview process (if the participants deemed such inclusion appropriate) to potentially enhance their reflection on their experiences. This would also serve well to connect the arts-based methods and research process as a whole (Leavy, 2015). Furthermore, views of other people in the lives of the participants may have led to a more comprehensive understanding of the issues raised by the participants. This may also have been accomplished by providing participants another opportunity for member checking where they could offer feedback closer to the end of the analysis rather than the beginning. Additionally, I am interested in the process of interrater reliability whereby 10% of the interview data is analyzed by independent researchers who have not previously been involved in the data analysis. (Nicholas et al., 2015). The purpose of engaging in this process is to seek consensus agreement among independent reviewers about the emergent codes used to formulate broader themes. In my study, this would have helped foster an increased sense of confidence in the overall direction of my interpretation of the data.

The current study was originally conceived as an exploratory study, and the rich narratives obtained by the participants have contributed to an improved understanding of their views. This should provide a useful starting point for further research. The challenges articulated by Lee et al. (2015) and the findings in the current study both support the use of strength-based group work in future studies evaluating MBIs with marginalized youth. Unfortunately, it is the general nature of facilitating small groups with participants involved in the child welfare system

that larger scale studies are not necessarily feasible, given the time, space and human resources required to facilitate inquiry. Furthermore, the assumption that interventions can only be considered effective when successfully evaluated by an experimental-design is disheartening and further limits the promise of helpful approaches amongst populations most in need (Smyth & Schorr, 2009). In general, youth in care are a very diverse group and helping interventions should be designed to acknowledge the need for individualized, strength-based approaches that are responsive to the unique needs of each individual. This should not, however, detract future researchers from attempting to extend the findings of this study that stand as a foundation for researchers to further determine the effectiveness of arts-based mindfulness methods with this population.

Still, future researchers may do well to consider alternate methods of evaluation that cater to the complexities of conducting research with marginalized populations. For example, Smyth and Schorr (2009) suggested more inclusive evaluation would insist upon rigour and accountability through more meaningful channels, including the use of qualitative methods, case studies, and comparing cohorts of participants to both baseline data and larger community level data. In particular, I agree with these researchers' recommendation that evaluation should incorporate an understanding of change theory and an appreciation of systemic complexity. Essentially, more inclusive evaluation would not seek to tease apart the individual braids of a person's life but instead embrace that intricacy through pragmatic approaches to finding out what works and why. This could also mean combining consensus among informed witnesses, and searching for a build-up of empirical support from related sources. These researchers further support interventions with marginalized groups that display characteristics such as equality in relationships, trust, partnership, flexibility within program standards, awareness of larger

environments, and accountability. From my perspective as a child and youth care worker, the design and implementation of the research groups in the current study represented a modest and meaningful contribution that includes several of these characteristics. I am grateful for the privilege of entering into intimate life spaces working with young people. In practice, I focus on being compassionate: seeking to better understanding the experience of others, and hopefully helping others make better sense of their own. So far, few studies have examined the role of the facilitator's mindfulness training and experience and this represents another important area requiring further study to determine appropriate standards for delivering mindfulness training to others, and the impact of such training on participants' experience and outcomes (Tan, 2015).

I am most proud of helping to provide and develop a promising group program for the participants, and I am encouraged by the growing public interest of the problems facing youth transitioning out of foster care. This information is vital considering public awareness is lacking yet key to leveraging the necessary pressure on decision-makers to implement change and eliminate further marginalization of vulnerable youth (Vancouver Foundation, 2013). Future research is critical for improving the visibility of youth transitioning out of foster care, the overall state of our child welfare system, and these youths' long-term health and education outcomes. These challenges are not new and in a wealthy country it is shameful that they exist to the degree that they do. As researchers have pointed out, the cost of avoiding these challenges will only increase across the lifespan of these youth making early investment a more logical path forward (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2013). For the general public, this research raises awareness about the challenges and opportunities we face in assisting youth transitioning out of foster care, helping inform and motivate the actions and directions of allied adults at the

community level (e.g., helping professionals, teachers, foster parents, friends, and family) to mobilize with young people, work together, and implement creative and practical solutions.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Questions

First Interview

1. What do I need to know to grow up well here?
2. How do you describe people who grow up well here despite the many problems they face?
3. What does it mean to you, to your family, and to your community, when bad things happen?
4. What kinds of things are most challenging for you growing up here?
5. What do you do when you face difficulties in your life?
6. What does being healthy mean to you and others in your family and community?
7. What do you do when you face difficulties in your life?
8. What does healthy meant to you and others in your family and community?
9. What do you do, and others you know do, to keep healthy mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually?
10. Can you share with me a story about another child who grew up well in this community despite facing many challenges?
11. What is it like for you to be “in the moment”?
12. Do you ever need to really concentrate? What do you do to help you focus?
13. What does the word “awareness” mean to you?
14. What does ‘being mindful’ or the word “mindfulness” mean to you?
15. What do you think the experience of participating in this group will be like?
16. Is there anything you think you might learn, or would like to learn?

17. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about?

Second Interview

1. What do I need to know to grow up well here?
2. How do you describe people who grow up well here despite the many problems they face?
3. What does it mean to you, to your family, and to your community, when bad things happen?
4. What kinds of things are most challenging for you growing up here?
5. What do you do when you face difficulties in your life?
6. What does being healthy mean to you and others in your family and community?
7. What do you do, and others you know do, to keep healthy, mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually?
8. Can you share with me a story about another child who grew up well in this community despite facing many challenges?
9. Can you share a story about how you have managed to overcome challenges you face personally, in your family, or outside your home in your community?
10. Is there a word you can think of for doing well?
11. What is it like for you to be “in the moment”?
12. Do you ever need to really concentrate? What do you do to help you focus?
13. What does the word “awareness” mean to you?
14. What does “being mindful” or the word “mindfulness” mean to you?
15. What kinds of things does this group make you think of?
16. Do you think about this group when you are not in the group?

17. Do you think mindfulness can help you in any way? How?
18. Do you see any connections between what you do in this group, with how you have managed to overcome challenges that you have faced?
19. What parts of your life do you see mindfulness playing a part in?
20. Are there any parts of this group that you think you would like to keep in your life?
21. If you can, can you describe a situation where your experience of this group has helped you?
22. Are there any parts of your day that you think are better now because of this group?
23. Has anything negative happened as a result of participating in the group?
24. What do you remember most about the group?
25. What's the worst part about this group? What didn't you like about it?
26. Is there anything about the group you think of on a day-to-day basis?
27. Can you give me an example of a skill from the group that you are likely to remember?
28. What about the group (anything) are you most likely to remember?
29. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about?

Third Interview

1. What do I need to know to group up well here?
2. How do you describe people who group up well here despite the many problems they face?
3. What does it mean to you, to your family, and to your community, when bad things happen?
4. What kinds of things are most challenging for you growing up here?
5. What do you do when you face difficulties in your life?

6. What does being healthy mean to you and others in your family and community?
7. What do you do, and others you know do, to keep healthy, mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually?
8. Can you share with me a story about another child who grew up well in this community despite facing many challenges?
9. Can you share a story about how you have managed to overcome challenges you face personally in your family or outside your home in your community?
10. Is there a word you can think of for “doing well”?
11. What is it like for you to be “in the moment”?
12. Do you ever need to really concentrate? What do you do to help you focus?
13. What does the word “awareness” mean to you?
14. What does “being mindful” or the word “mindfulness” mean to you?
15. What kinds of things does this group make you think of?
16. Do you think about this group when you are not in the group?
17. Do you think mindfulness can help you in any way? How?
18. Do you see any connections between what you do in this group, with how you have managed to overcome challenges that you have faced?
19. Have you thought about mindfulness since your participation in the group?
20. Can you think of an area of your life that has been impacted by your experience in the group?
21. Are there any parts of this group that you have kept in your life?
22. If you can, can you describe a situation where your experience of this group has helped you?

23. Are there any parts of your day that you think are better now because of your experience with the group?
24. Has anything negative happened as a result of participating in the group?
25. What do you remember most about the group?
26. What was the worst part about your experience with the group? What didn't you like about it?
27. Is there anything about the group you think of on a day-to-day basis?
28. Can you give me an example of a skill from the group that you remember?
29. What about the group (anything) are you most likely to remember?
30. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about?

Appendix B: Ethical Approval



Research, Development &
Creativity Office
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APPROVAL FOR CONDUCTING RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

Research Ethics Board – Laurentian University

This letter confirms that the research project identified below has successfully passed the ethics review by the Laurentian University Research Ethics Board (REB). Your ethics approval date, other milestone dates, and any special conditions for your project are indicated below.

TYPE OF APPROVAL	New	X	Modifications to project	Time extension
Name of Principal Investigator and school/department	Sean Loughheed (Ph.D. Northern and Rural Health) — Dr. Diana Coholic (supervisor)			
Title of Project	<i>Exploring the links between mindfulness and resilience with youth transitioning out of foster care into independent living</i>			
REB file number	2011-01-11			
Date of original approval of project	February 23 rd 2011			
Date of approval of project modifications or extension (if applicable)				
Final/Interim report due on	February 23 rd 2012			
Conditions placed on project	Final or interim report on February 23 rd 2012			

During the course of your research, no deviations or changes to the protocol, recruitment or consent forms may be initiated without prior written approval from the REB. If you wish to modify your research project, please complete the appropriate [REB form](#).

All projects must submit a report to REB at least once per year. If involvement with human participants continues for longer than one year (e.g. you have not completed the objectives of the study and have not yet terminated contact with the participants, except for feedback of final results to participants), you must request an extension using the appropriate [REB FORM](#).

In all cases, please ensure that your research complies with the [Tri-Council Policy Statement \(TCPS\)](#). Also please quote your REB file number on all future correspondence with the REB office.

Congratulations, and best of luck in conducting your research.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "D Côté".

Daniel Côté, Ph.D.
Chair of the *Laurentian University Research Ethics Board*
Laurentian University

Appendix C: Goals and Descriptions of Group Sessions

Session One

The goals in session one all involved introducing participants to the group and developing their comfort and sense of safety. Specifically, this included developing group guidelines, discussing confidentiality, introducing the concept of mindfulness and experiencing fun to foster engagement and group cohesion. The first session of both the boys' and girls' group was exciting for participants and facilitators alike. It had been a long process that culminated in active participation and positive energy with participants forthright to share their initial expectations and impressions of the group activities.

Activities:

Medicine Ball Warm-Up

Name Draw

Mindfulness 101

Thought Jar

Listening for a Minute

Break

Group Guidelines

Quarter Game

Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation

Closing with Rock

Medicine ball warm-up. This activity served as the main primer in each of the group sessions and was used as the participants arrived to the group. To facilitate this activity, a medicine ball (weight and size appropriate to the participants) was tossed between participants

standing in a circle. In later sessions, participants adapted the activity to roll the ball to one another while seated in a circle. Facilitators brought participants' attention to the feel of the medicine ball while catching and throwing, the pattern of the ball's surface, and the noise of the ball rolling across a hollow-sounding floor. The activity eased participants into the rhythm of the group and was finished when the final participant arrived. Indeed, this activity was repeated in almost every session because of how effective it was at gathering the group together in a casual and non-threatening yet purposeful way. The inclusion of the medicine ball was determined to be appropriate for this age group because they were physically able to safely throw/roll and receive the ball without injury.

Name draw. This activity introduced participants to some of the art supplies in a non-threatening (less intimidating) way and provided a non-verbal way to introduce participants to one another. Essentially, participants were invited to draw their name on a small piece of paper and communicate one thing about themselves that they were comfortable sharing (e.g., favourite hobby) with the group through the way they drew their name. For example, I placed the letters of my name in the shape of a canoe to share that I enjoyed paddling. The goal of this activity was to help introduce one another, foster group cohesion by discovering shared interests, and provide assistance in learning the names of fellow participants.

Mindfulness 101. In the first group, participants were introduced to the concept of mindfulness, focusing as an introduction on the well-known Kabat-Zinn (2003) definition. I also introduced participants to the idea of how our senses gather information, which is perceived by our central nervous system as stressful or non-stressful, emphasizing how mindfulness can help us cope with stress. The goal of this part of the session was to start introducing participants to basic concepts of mindfulness in a way that was relevant and engaging. As previously

highlighted, Mindfulness 101 was repeated in each session. In response, participants asked relevant questions, about the concepts being discussed, and how they related to their experience of practicing mindfulness in and outside of the group sessions. Based on this dialogue, it seemed participants felt empowered by learning about the potential benefits of mindfulness practice. However, I was mindful to not allow this lecture-style component of the group to run longer than approximately five minutes per session in order to keep focused on the arts-based and experiential focus of the group.

Thought jar. This activity was based on the Thought Jar originally discussed in Coholic (2010) but adapted for the older youth in these groups. In keeping with the goal of introducing mindfulness, participants were invited to add beads to a jar half-filled with water. Each bead represented a thought or feeling they recently experienced. With these youth, we volunteered thoughts and feelings at the beginning of the activity that were age-appropriate and related to the challenges that we surmised these youth would be facing at school and related to the process of leaving their foster homes. The jar was passed around a circle until many beads floated about. Participants were further invited to imagine the words of the thought written in tiny letters on the surface of the beads. The lid was then fastened and the jar shaken and swirled. A conversation was then facilitated about how it is easier to make sense of thoughts and feelings when our minds are calm versus when they are racing and distracted with many thoughts and feelings. This related to the introductory concept of mindfulness that focused on paying attention on purpose, in the present moment. Further, the activity helped make explicit the direct connection between the thoughts we generate, corresponding feelings, and their impact on our actions. These youth could easily relate to the example of reading something hurtful on social media, becoming emotionally upset and reacting angrily. Next, participants were provided with materials to create

and decorate their own jar that they took home to provide a reminder about the importance of practicing mindfulness away from the group.

Listening for a minute. In this activity, participants were invited to listen for one minute while one of the facilitators timed the exercise. Building from the concepts introduced in Mindfulness 101, the goal of this activity was to demonstrate the pivotal role our senses play in gathering information. Participants were encouraged to document the sounds they heard over the course of the exercise before a follow-up discussion about how mindfulness could enhance their listening skills. Participants compared their own lists of recorded observations and generally were impressed that indeed they heard more sounds than they anticipated simply by paying attention on purpose in the present moment.

Group guidelines. The goal of creating group guidelines was to help create a safe space for all participants. Among younger participants, this process usually occurs at the beginning in order to establish a sense of safety and provide some direction for appropriate behaviour. However, we were able to facilitate a couple of activities prior to introducing the idea of group guidelines so that participants would not feel as though they were being told how to act. Instead, during the food break, I approached the subject of group guidelines by assisting participants to draft a set of guidelines, including the importance of confidentiality, to govern their own behaviour while participating in the group sessions. The decision to name this activity “guidelines” versus “rules” related to the age and maturity of the participants and their ability to foster respect within the group and govern their own behaviour with less facilitator intervention. For example, participants endorsed the suggestion of a “clean-air” policy where no put-downs, even if intended in a joking manner, would be considered appropriate. The guidelines were then displayed and occasionally participants would refer back to them if conversation veered in a

direction that they felt was contrary to the policy. Of note, inappropriate behaviour was not observed over the course of 10 sessions, which gives some indication of the appropriateness of the referrals received by MCFD staff, and both the participants' interest in the group and their level of group readiness.

One final note on establishing guidelines for the group; it can be said that a group begins a closing process the moment it forms. Unfortunately, youth involved in the child welfare system know this experience intimately because many people enter and exit their lives. I took this opportunity to make explicit the purposefulness of the research process, and the opportunity for participants to gain knowledge, skills and abilities could be useful to them after the group had ended. This set an appropriate tone to assist participants in remembering that it was entirely possible that strong bonds would form within the group but that the group was finite in terms of session length and number of sessions.

Quarter game. This was a popular activity that was repeated with the participants. I originally learned about this game while working at an overnight residential summer camp, where children and youth would attend for one or two weeks eventually leading to longer leadership sessions that were five weeks in length. The purpose of the activity in that context was to occupy campers inside during rainy days however the game helps participants to learn to pay attention. Seated in two teams with an equal number of participants on each side of a table, a quarter was given to one team and instructed to discreetly pass the quarter amongst one another with their hands under the table. The opposing team was encouraged to mindfully observe the subtle movements of their "opponents." Within a couple of minutes, the opposing team could call "hands-up" signaling the team with the quarter to place their elbows on the table with their fists tightly clenched in the air. The opposing team would then slowly count "1, 2, 3, hands-

down” at which time the team with the quarter would in unison slam their hands, palms-open, onto the table; the quarter somewhere underneath. Emphasizing mindful attention,, the facilitator would invite the opposing team to determine in reverse order (identify the hand with the quarter last) the hand that held the quarter. Only upon group consensus can a hand be eliminated, usually determined by agreement to the question “Is that your final answer?” This activity was very popular among participants given how much fun they had, all while learning to pay attention to how they perceived information by way of their senses.

Introduction to mindfulness meditation. Practicing mindfulness by way of audio-recorded meditation or by listening to one of the facilitators read aloud a meditation was an activity that I endeavoured to include in each session. Participants were encouraged to spread out in a comfortable space in the room and listen to a pre-recorded mindful meditation (Williams, Teasdale, Zegal & Kabat-Zinn, 2007). In the first group sessions, pre-recorded clips were less than three minutes. This was the shortest amount of time that the clips could be modified without ending the clip abruptly. In later group sessions, participants developed the ability and comfort with the process to sustain their attention for upwards of seven minutes. However, in feedback during the group sessions and in the post-group interview, participants remarked that they had difficulty sitting still and listening for the length of the meditation. Indeed, participants were often observed to giggle and laugh during the practice period. Participants were encouraged to remember that mindfulness requires practice. Similarly, I facilitated discussion normalizing feelings of frustration and boredom, and of wandering thoughts after the mediation had ended. The goal of the activity was to provide an opportunity to practice mindfulness in a more traditional way and while it may not have been as engaging as other activities, I believe it was

important to expose participants to this type of traditional mindfulness practice but in a way that the youth could achieve success with it.

Closing with rock. The goal of this activity, facilitated at the end of each session, was to create space for purposeful reflection, and to emphasize the importance of listening, in the moment, as a way to cultivate present moment awareness and appreciation for what may otherwise go unnoticed. In this activity, a rock is passed among participants seated in a circle. With one participant speaking at a time, participants were invited to share their impressions of the group session experience. This provided valuable feedback for the facilitators in terms of determining where the instruction was making an impact. Within an experiential learning framework, it also created proverbial space for reflection in the group sessions, allowing the participants to deepen their initial understanding of mindfulness. The rock had a resting place in the group room and only would be used at the end of each session in order to facilitate the closing. The reason a rock was selected was based on past experience facilitating groups with young people. Rocks come in all shapes and sizes, and this idea is a natural fit for discussing the uniqueness and diversity of group participants. Additionally, the selection of a rock that is slightly heavy and textured seems to help underline the gravity of the activity and the importance of listening respectfully to one another.

Session Two

The goals of session two included reviewing the previous session's learning, discussing the concept of developing self-awareness as an outcome of learning mindfulness, and providing opportunities for further practice, particularly along the lines of paying attention to the role of our senses except this time focusing on our sense of smell. Again, the group session opened with the Medicine Ball Warm-Up and Mindfulness 101. After the break, we continued with the group

activities by listening to the same pre-recorded mindfulness meditation and by facilitating a mindful smelling activity. The session ended with Closing with Rock.

Activities:

Medicine Ball Warm-Up

Mindfulness 101

Me as a Tree

Break

FFEACH

Mindfulness Meditation

Mindful Smelling

Closing with Rock

Me as a tree. This was an arts-based activity originally adapted from Coholic (2010). The activity aimed to foster self-awareness and build group cohesion by learning more about one another. In turn, the activity also sought to cultivate self-compassion and group camaraderie. The art supplies included coloured paper and markers and the instructions were kept intentionally brief: “If you were a tree, what would you look like?” This enabled varying interpretation by participants. With younger children, often more instructions need to be provided such as “What types of trees do you like best and why? Is anything growing in your tree? Does your tree have roots?” Given that the participants in the current study had established themselves as non-judgmental and accepting of one another, I felt it was an acceptable risk to pursue maximum creative possibility; thus, fewer instructions were given. This activity provided a safe opportunity for participants to explore and talk about themselves. It was also an opportunity for the facilitators to underline how each person is unique yet can shares similar challenges and

strengths. In the follow-up discussion from this activity, facilitators connected the importance of celebrating these abilities, and underlined how part of understanding mindfulness is learning to be less non-judgmental about ourselves. In an intentional way, discussing this concept within a supportive group of peers aimed to foster social connectedness and support.

Fast food, electrical appliances, cartoon heroes (FFEACH). This activity is essentially an adapted form of ‘Charades’ that sees one participant from each team drawing images of words they receive from the facilitator while their teammates guess the answer aloud. The goal of this activity was to have fun, build group cohesion, and refocus the attention of group participants prior to resuming mindfulness practice. The words on each team’s list follow a pattern of being (1) an item of fast food, (2) an electrical appliance, and (3) a cartoon hero. Establishing narrower categories within charades is an effective way to lessen the anxiety that some participants may feel when it comes to drawing under the pressure of a time-sensitive performance, in front of others. When each word is guessed correctly, a teammate received the next word from the facilitator. Since both teams were drawing at the same time, the activity became somewhat of a relay; fun ensued, further galvanizing group cohesion through shared positive experience.

Mindful smelling. This activity extended the aims of the previous week’s focus on paying attention to the senses during Listening for a Minute by inviting participants to take turns uncapping and smelling what was inside a number of small glass jars. The prevailing goal of this activity was to help participants practice being mindful and learn to pay attention to their observations in a non-judgmental way. Participants were encouraged to observe their reactions to what they smelled and further reminded to suspend judgement of the reactions as intrinsically good or bad. After the activity, participants were invited to share aloud their experience: what it was like to focus on their sense of smell, and the process of anticipation, observation and non-

judgement. Participants referred to notes they had written on paper while uncapping and smelling each of the jars. It was evident that participants in both groups enjoyed this activity, particularly others' reactions to strong odours. This provided ample opportunity to underline the idea of practicing non-judgement.

Session Three

Session three affirmed the concepts of mindfulness introduced in the first two sessions: paying attention on purpose in the present moment in a non-judgmental way, learning about the role of our senses in the way our bodies receive and perceive information, cultivating self-awareness and self-compassion, and building group cohesion and social support. Session three expanded each participant's exposure to additional art supplies such as watercolour paints and clay. As the participants became more comfortable in the group they were eager to try using new art materials. Other adaptations for session three included the substitution of the pre-recorded mindfulness meditation with a spoken word meditation to introduce the concept of acceptance, and the inclusion of a children's story to underline the concept of self-awareness.

Activities:

Medicine Ball Warm-Up

Mindfulness 101

We Are All Connected

Paint to Music

Break

Meditation on the Bubble

Grumpy Bird (with clay)

Closing with Rock

We are all connected. This activity was originally inspired by Jenkins (2008). The goal of this activity was to continue to foster group cohesion by learning more about one another. It was anticipated that this process would again cultivate a sense of connectedness and support. Participants were invited to decorate a wooden clothespin using markers or crayons representing something about themselves that they were comfortable sharing with the group. For example, one participant chose to draw a small picture of his guitar to convey his interest in music. Next, participants described the clothespin to the group and fastened the clothespin to a piece of yarn. The yarn affixed with clothespins was hung in the room for the remainder of the group sessions as a way to anchor the experience and symbolize the group connection. At the end of the last group session, participants could take their individual clothespins home.

Paint to music. This activity was originally developed with younger children (Coholic, 2010) and was adapted here for older youth. Furthermore, due to the activity's popularity, it was repeated in latter group sessions in a collaborative format. However, this activity was first facilitated by distributing small numbered square pieces of paper to participants. Next, we played five short (no more than three minutes) pre-recorded songs and invited participants to consider what images or feelings the songs made them think about and feel. Participants were invited to paint the images or emotions that best represented the music. At the end of each clip, completed squares were displayed on the ground in numbered rows. At the end of the last clip, participants formed a large "quilt-like" pattern of painted squares on the ground. Facilitators then led a discussion about the trends/patterns/similarities/differences that the music evoked through the painting. The goal of this activity was to foster self-awareness by discussing how our emotions can shift based on our experiences, in this case by listening to different types of music. It was clear that this was one of the most popular activities based on how engaged participants were.

For example, there was little conversation while the music was playing and rich discussion afterward when participants were invited to stand over the quilt and search for patterns.

Meditation on the bubble. Reading this spoken meditation out loud to participants, I adapted it from a mindfulness meditation first discussed by Hooker and Fodor (2008). The goal of this activity was to create an opportunity for more formal mindfulness practice. Participants were invited to sit comfortably and focus on the words and images the meditation created in their minds. Essentially, the goal of this meditation was to assist participants in developing a new relationship with their thoughts, by practicing how to notice or observe thoughts but developing some “distance” in the process. For example, one participant talked about the difficulty she had in getting to sleep. She described being “flooded” by her thoughts. Another participant described her thoughts as “racing.”

This meditation encouraged participants to learn how to notice their thoughts by visualizing the words of the thoughts rising like a bubble or a cloud. Adapting the material to meet the needs of older adolescents, I spoke about how participants could imagine words rising like closing credits on a screen in a film, concentrating on slowing the pace that the film credits roll. One participant likened the idea to seeing her thoughts as separate from her “calm” self. The idea of slowing our thoughts encouraged participants to notice their thoughts in a way that was more effective and less distressing. Being mindful can help a young person to view negative thoughts as temporary events rather than concrete certainties of reality, and it may nurture malleable responses in contrast to unhelpful rumination (Ciarrochi, Kashdan, Leeson, Heaven & Jordan, 2011). By reading the word of each thought silently during the meditation, observing one’s reactions but “standing apart” from the thought, and learning to let go as the thoughts

floated away by not judging the thought or feeling, participants successfully practiced being more mindful of their thoughts and feelings.

Grumpy bird. The goal of this activity was to foster a conversation about the relationship between our thoughts, feelings and behaviours. This activity also provided another opportunity for participants to express themselves using new art materials (clay). Participants were invited to listen to a short story (Tankard, 2007) related to the concept of mindfulness and to shape the images that the story made the participants think of. Working with the clay was considered beneficial for three reasons. First, it promoted engagement in the group methods by engaging participants with a new medium for artistic expression. Second, due to the impermanent nature of working with clay, participants were encouraged to feel at ease about starting again, if desired. Likewise, participants could simply mash up the clay at any point in the process if that helped to ease the pressure of having to sculpt a character from the story. Third, from a practical perspective, it assisted participants to listen to the story by helping them to pay attention to the story and to what the story made them think about or feel.

Reading and listening to this story assisted participants to discuss their feelings in part because participants were able to identify with the feelings expressed by the story's main character. The opportunity to discuss the story created space for the participants to share their own feelings and discuss their own opinions about times when they have felt the same emotions. The ability to see situations from someone else's perspective is important in the development of empathy and improved relationships, which is of particular importance among youth transitioning out of foster care.

Session Four

The activities in session four continued the exploration of arts-based methods to discover thoughts and feelings, develop self-awareness, and build group cohesion and support among the participants. Practicing mindfulness in this way underlined that these concepts could assist participants both on an individual (e.g. individual emotion regulation, stress management and problem-solving) and group basis (e.g. group cohesion, fun, social support). In this session, I also reinforced the idea of practicing mindfulness outside of the group by facilitating activities that could be replicated and practiced at home. Participants were encouraged to discuss their experiences with mindfulness with anyone who showed interest.

Activities:

Medicine Ball Warm-Up/Best Medicine

Mindfulness 101

Doodle Draw

Feelings Inventory

Break

NIM

Mindfulness Meditation

Homework: Feelings Inventory/Dream Journals

Closing with Rock

Best medicine. This goal of this activity was to discuss how our moods influence our ability to manage stress. In the context of the medicine ball warm-up, participants were instructed to say a person's name aloud and laugh forcibly and loudly before throwing/rolling the ball to that person. Participants were somewhat weary with the instructions but after I began the activity by laughing loudly, participants started to smile. Eventually, the activity catches on and

there are many reactionary laughs to the forced laughter. The game ends with everyone laughing. Next, I facilitated a brief conversation about empathy and our ability as humans to witness another person experience an emotion and connect to the experience of the same emotion within ourselves. This fostered a discussion where participants shared their own reactions to seeing another person sad, for example, and helped participants better understand why they react emotionally in the way that they do. Conversely, I was able to draw participants' attention back to the idea that humour can be a powerful tool to help deal with difficult circumstances by way of strengthening supportive relationships based on shared experiences that foster empathy, connection and understanding between people.

Doodle draw. Typically, the goal of this activity is to establish comfort with the art materials. However, in this session, it was used to to discuss the concepts of mindfulness related to observing without judgement. On a piece of coloured paper, participants were invited to doodle with crayons/markers for approximately 20 seconds and then to review their drawing and search for images within the doodle. To help participants consider an alternative perspective, they were invited to turn the page sideways. Next, participants modified their drawings by colouring in shapes, shading and/or adding more detail. Meanwhile, we facilitated a conversation about the importance of practicing mindfulness as a way to develop skills to be able, amid challenging circumstances, to react non-judgmentally, and to consider alternate more helpful perspectives. Just like the activity itself, this requires an open-minded, almost curious, approach.

Being open-mind is challenging for these youth because of how often they have been let down. Essentially, we were asking participants to consider that they could make choices about their feelings and how they expressed them. This led to a critical discussion about their experiences of being in care. Participants were able to cultivate a sense of hopefulness and

acceptance towards the idea that although we have less control on decisions happening around us, we have the ability to develop skills that help us to cope.

Feelings inventory. The goal of this activity adapted from the original cited by Coholic (2010) was to provide an opportunity for participants to explore and reflect on their emotions. It was facilitated by inviting participants to brainstorm a list of the emotions that they experienced during that day (or the day prior). Next, using coloured paper and paint, crayons, or markers, participants were encouraged to draw those feelings on the page in relation to how intensely or for what duration they were experienced. For example, if someone was angry for a large portion of the day or the anger was intense, more of the page would be represented by that emotion. The simplest representation of the feelings inventory is a pie chart however some participants chose to draw books on a shelf, toppings on a pizza, or raindrops from a cloud. Finally, participants were asked to envision how their day may be different if they were able to experience different emotions than those represented on the inventory. Participants were encouraged to redraw the inventory with this idea in mind, redistributing the amount of space on the page associated with more helpful emotions. Participants were further encouraged to consider completing an inventory on their own at home before the next session.

This actively assisted participants to safely explore and reflect on potentially tumultuous events in their recent histories. In a safe and supported way, participants were encouraged to stop and reflect on recent emotional experiences, creating the opportunity for new insight and learning (self-awareness) about the way they usually respond emotionally, hopefully encouraging the cultivation of new emotional regulation skills. Participants reported in the sessions and the interviews doing this activity outside the group, lending support that we can make choices about how we feel when we are mindful as opposed to being controlled by them.

Nim. This is a fun game played between two people that we chose to introduce over the break as a way to encourage comradery, but also to be able to link to goals of mindful practice, for instance paying close attention. Using any small objects, such as toothpicks in this case, participants took turns removing objects from an arranged pattern across four rows (first row with one toothpick, second row with three, third row with five and fourth row with seven). The goal of this game was to leave the opponent with the last toothpick. Two participants took turns eliminating toothpicks with the object to not be the player left with a single toothpick. Only two rules governed the participants' movement: they may take as many toothpicks away at a time but only from one row at a time. In the same vein as the medicine ball warm-up, which proved quite useful in engaging participants arriving to the group at different times, we found this game helpful in refocusing the attention of the participants for the latter half of the group as they were finishing eating their sandwiches at different times.

Dream journals. At the end of session four, participants were introduced to the idea of documenting their dreams with the goal being to help explore their feelings. Participants were very interested in the idea of examining their dreams. To facilitate the process, small journals were distributed to and decorated by each participant. The instructions were to place the journal close to each participant's bed and document, as soon as possible upon waking, any details from dreams that were remembered. Participants returned to the next group session and extended the activity by drawing/painting the images from their dreams. Since group cohesion was well-established by this point, participants were very supportive in listening, offering and sharing positive encouragement. The tone was so positive in part because of the idea that all dreams, including those that may be frightening, served the function of improving their lives in that they are the body's way of reminding participants to pay attention to things that may be unsettled and

warrant further self-care (Taylor, 1992). In general, the consideration of dreams is useful because of the potential for an individual to be empowered by learning something about themselves, and/or seeing a situation in a new way.

Session Five

The activities in session five also attempted to engage participants through small teamwork activities that included getting up, moving around, and safely “spotting” one another. Spotting can be described as a technique for ensuring safety among participants, often in low and high ropes challenge courses and rock climbing activities. Yet, the same technique can be applied where no climbing is involved but there is still an element of physical risk. Additionally, it was apparent that participants had developed trusting relationships with one another so I decided they could engage in activities that required more trust in order to safely experience individual and team success. By engaging participants in this way, the activities in this session underlined the concepts of strengthening relationships and interdependence. There were many times when the participants were vulnerable to the idea that they may fall if not properly supported by their peers. Obviously, for individuals who have been let down by others in the past, being able to develop trust and not rely solely on one’s self to prevent calamity was an important part of strengthening relationships with others.

The broader connections to mindfulness involved in this session included an emphasis on the role of our senses in gathering information. Thus, through each activity, especially when participants were asked to close their eyes, I emphasized the ideas of paying attention to the other senses and noticing the unfolding of their experience in a new way. More broadly, these collaborative team-oriented activities underlined the concept of gratitude and thankfulness in mindfulness practice as participants were relying on one another to safely facilitate the exercises

amid the possibility of physical harm (albeit remote). I stressed the importance of each person's responsibility in taking care of their partners in the activities, underlining again their sense of connection to a larger picture/process, which I believed was important for youth transitioning out of foster care to hear since they can often experience social isolation.

Activities:

Medicine Ball Warm-Up

Trust Leans/Falls; Wind in the Willows

Mindfulness 101

Seeds of Consciousness

Break

Mindfulness Meditation

Breathing Exercises

Homework

Closing with Rock

Trust leans/falls. The goal of this activity was to utilize the trust and group cohesion that had been established in the group to encourage participants to safely extend their respective “comfort zones” to improve their self-esteem, and strengthen the relationships among participants by participating in a shared experience that required trust and cooperation. This activity was facilitated using proper spotting technique, which involved teaching participants a set of verbal cues that led to one participant essentially leaning backward until they are falling into the embrace of their co-participant. In pairs, participants learned how to safely “catch” their partner who intentionally leaned off balance. Without moving their planted feet, the person who is about to fall says “ready to lean”. This is answered by another participant standing

directly behind their partner with one foot slightly in front of the other and with arms extended. This person said: “lean away” leaving the falling participant with arms crossed and both feet planted to exclaim “leaning” before leaning backward into the receiving stance of their partner. The activity is then repeated if both parties are comfortable. The progression of this activity moved from leaning to falling; both acts requiring one person to trust the other to catch them safely. One other way to increase the level of challenge involved for participants is to invite those partners who are leaning and falling to do so with their eyes closed. Normally, this can be quite difficult for youth who have established few trusting relationships and have learned to rely on themselves first and foremost.

Wind in the willows. The goals of this activity are the same as in trusting leans and falls. This activity follows a progression as far as the level of difficulty and cooperation required as this activity involves all group members at the same time. Facilitators invited one participant to stand with feet narrowly planted, arms folded across their chest, and eyes closed (optional) in the centre of a small circle consisting of fellow participants. The person in the middle when they were comfortable to do so, slowly leaned into the same spotting embrace of the remaining participants. As the name of the activity suggests, the participant leaned in various directions as their peers slowly received and pushed back (ever so slightly) their co-participant in another direction, creating the effect of a tree swaying in the wind.

Seeds of consciousness. In this activity, participants planted snap pea and nasturtium seeds in large planter pots outside of the group building as a way to foster ownership of the group space, but also to create a means for discussing concepts of mindfulness such as paying attention (to the plants each week as they began to grow and change), and self-compassion and acceptance (comparing the care participants demonstrated for the plants to help them grow to the

care we show ourselves to help us grow and develop). This was also a wonderful opportunity to emphasize the contributions of external factors to the plants' development including the sun, the water and nutrient-rich soil the participants provided. Participants regularly watered the plants, monitored growth, and evaluated what the plants needed (e.g., proper amounts of sun and water) to realize their full potential. This activity helped stimulate conversations identifying the external factors that supported the participants' development and well-being. Correspondingly, we would look for teachable moments to transfer the discussion about what the plants needed to prosper to what healthy young adults required. This served as an appropriate segue into a discussion about our connection with broader structures such as having a role in our community, and the role our cultural background may play to an emerging sense of self.

Participants were also invited to decorate individual seed pots and encouraged to plant snap peas that they would later take home thereby promoting mindfulness practice outside of the group and the transfer of the learning from the group sessions to the home environment. The activity was also discussed with foster parents in order to help them understand what had transpired in the group and how they could underline the learning (simply through casual conversation about the plants) outside of the group.

Breathing exercises. In session five, participants were introduced to two different types of breathing exercises originally developed with younger children in the HAP groups (Coholic, 2010). The first was described as “deep belly breathing” and encouraged participants to breathe deeply from their diaphragms, inhaling, holding and exhaling for a numbered count spoken in a calm, steady rhythm: “one and two and three and four, and hold and two and three and four, and out and two and three and four.” The second activity was originally described elsewhere (Coholic, 2010) and involved participants learning a short story about a watermelon in order to

help them remember corresponding Tai Chi movements, that were matched with calm and steady inhalations and exhalations. In the introductions during session five, participants were encouraged to breathe deeply through the nostrils and focus on the way it felt to push new oxygen to the extremities. The adaptation for these participants was to pair the breathing exercises with earlier discussions surrounding physiological benefits (e.g. reducing release of stress hormone cortisol, for example) of not only deep breathing, but also paying attention to our breathing. In the group sessions, the female group stated they enjoyed the deep belly breathing in part because some of the participants had attended (and enjoyed) yoga in the past and the breathing reminded them of that positively-regarded experience.

Session Six

By session six, participants had grown accustomed to the group process and were very comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas with other group members. Based on this apparent level of comfort, this session's focus expanded the use of creative materials to include sand and photography, incorporating two activities that extended the dream journal exercise. The goals in session six included continued practice developing self-awareness and being self-compassionate.

Activities:

Medicine Ball Warm-Up

Mindfulness 101

Breathing Exercises

Quarter Game

Dream Sand

Break

Meditation on the Bubble

Mindful Eating

Back to Back

Closing with Rock

Dream sand. The goal of this activity was to introduce participants to the use of sand and photography as a way to help participants continue to develop self-awareness. With the completed dream journals, participants were invited to review their entries to date and select a dream or image from a dream to recreate using coloured sand. Participants were encouraged to consider how sand is malleable and the picture they would create with it will not last as the sand is swept up. Furthermore, I pointed out that just as we come to know what our own strengths are, people can learn to work with the assets sand contains (e.g., vibrant colours, flexibility) as a way to feel more connected to the image from the dream. Later, I discussed that what participants created with the sand was not meant to last but that the positive experience and/or memory of working with sand was something they could draw from again. This was connected with the concept of being able to appreciate and focus on the present moment and to encourage participants to practice self-compassion by focusing on staying present and not judging their creation, since the prevailing concern from some participants in working with sand was that the end result they created may not be any “good.” Participants were then invited to take pictures of their sand creation to commemorate the experience.

Mindful eating. This exercise was adapted from a traditional mindful eating meditation (Hooker & Fodor, 2008). I presented the original meditation to the participants and asked them for feedback about the process. This this, I found that the way the meditation as originally presented was not very engaging for the participants because they felt the language was too formal and therefore felt removed from something that they could grasp. So, we adapted the

meditation using language that I felt would increase engagement among participants, and repeated the practice. In return, participants commented that spoken meditations seemed more accessible to them when the language was not overly complicated or exaggerated. Said another way, participants appeared to appreciate straightforwardness rather than what they perceived as abstract references, for example, to the universe. As a way to further adapt the activity to their needs, participants were encouraged to document all the different thoughts they had while eating a cookie using a paper and pen but remaining non-judgmental throughout the process of observing and writing. The goal of the activity was to become more aware of the way our senses receive information and how we react to that information. Afterwards, participants shared the lists as a group: each recounting the various steps, amazed at how involved the task was for something that seemed simple upon first glance.

Back to back. The goal of this activity was to develop awareness about the importance of listening to improve communication in relationships. In pairs, participants sit back to back in chairs with one participant holding a small simple drawing (e.g., sailboat on the water on a sunny day) and the other participant holding a clipboard with a blank piece of paper and a pen. The objective of the activity is for the participant holding the picture to give instructions to their partner in order to successfully replicate the drawing on the blank page. However, without being able to rely on their sense of sight, participants were asked to focus on listening carefully. The participant holding the drawing was encouraged to provide step by step instructions (rather than say outright what the drawing was) as a way to see how close the final drawing would replicate the original.

Session Seven

In this session, variations of activities that had been previously introduced were facilitated in order to emphasize the underlying concepts of mindfulness but in the way that would appear fresh and engaging for the participants. These concepts included helping participants develop non-judgmental self-awareness by continuing to explore the role of their senses in shaping their thoughts and feelings. This session also focused on strengthening the relationships between participants by fostering group cohesion, and encouraging participants to cultivate connections outside of the group to broader structures such as their community and to culture, if they deemed that of interest and importance to explore further.

Activities:

Medicine Ball Warm-Up

Mindfulness 101

Breathing Exercises

One Foot Balance

Mindful Walking

Me as a River

Break

Mindfulness Meditation

Group Island

Closing with Rock

One foot balance. Participants were invited to stand on one foot while practicing the mindful breathing exercises, and focus on the physical sensations felt in different parts of the foot. This activity was presented as a way to replicate the benefits of the breathing exercises while providing variation in the activity to retain the participants' interest and positive level of

engagement. Participants were encouraged to focus on the process of standing on one foot, feeling their connection to the ground, and to embrace openness toward the difficulty that the task presented, rather than become frustrated.

Mindful walking. Building as a progression from the first activity, participants were invited to remove their shoes if they chose and walk around the building following a path that everyone walked together first as a group. Participants began walking at staggered intervals along the same prescribed path allowing space between each person so that they would have less difficulty focusing with fewer distractions. Participants were asked to take notice of the changing terrain (grass to pavement to wooden stairs) and to pay attention to the different sensations felt through their feet. Afterwards, participants were encouraged, on a large piece of paper, to draw the path they had walked in a way that communicated the patterns of the terrain and the various sensations experienced. Some participants drew what looked like a treasure map to outline the path they had walked, complete with different patterns drawn in various colours on the map representing the sensations and textures participants had noticed while walking around the building. While participants took turns sharing and explaining their pictures, I underlined the importance of incorporating mindfulness practice into everyday activities. Participants were asked to consider practicing mindful walking outside of the group and to collect some sea glass, small shells, and small stones for a future activity.

Me as a river. Adapted from the activity cited elsewhere (Coholic, 2010), participants were invited to draw themselves as if they were a river. Essentially, this activity was a variation of “Me as a Tree” encouraging the development of self-awareness, and self-expression of a person’s feelings and thoughts, and strengths. Through this activity, I was able to facilitate discussion helping the participants to better understand themselves and supported participants to

talk about their lives using the river in the activity as a metaphor. For example, participants were prompted to consider where the river was going, what was in/around the river, how fast was it flowing, and whether there were any rapids. This activity fostered substantive sharing about their perception of past challenges and hopeful outlooks for the future.

Group island. In this collaborative activity, participants were invited to draw the outline of an island on a large piece of paper. Next, participants considered a scenario that they had all survived a plane crash landing on this island and were now awaiting rescue. Having been able to pack three items prior to boarding the flight, participants were asked to consider what those items were and how they would survive as a group. I encouraged participants to discuss as a group and draw the resulting scenario on paper. Given that these participants were older and had established a high level of trust with one another, facilitators stepped back and mostly observed the process. The activity was well-received by the participants and an elaborate landscape was created on the island drawing, which fostered opportunities for dialogue around the ideas that surfaced through the drawing such as survival, safety, and the importance of cooperation and connection to broader networks such as community. The goal of this activity was to reinforce group cohesion and collaboration.

Session Eight

In advance of session eight, a scheduling conflict among multiple group members arose. Rather than cancelling the session, the decision was made to forgo our usual venue and facilitate a hike outdoors at a time and place that would accommodate group members. The goals of the session included practicing mindful awareness and appreciation by emphasizing the concept of “beginner’s mind.”

Activities:

Mindfulness 101

Nature Walk

Closing with Rock

Nature walk. For this session, I decided to organize an hour long hike into an adjoining forest trail whereby participants would have the opportunity to practice mindfulness by paying attention to the sounds, sights and smells all around them. The inspiration for this activity stemmed from American philosopher Robert Pirsig (1974) that underlined the importance of mountain slopes in defining the peak. Pirsig's emphasis on noticing the finer details involved in the process of climbing a mountain stand out in contrast to the goal of simply reaching the top. Similarly, I encouraged participants to consider the experience of walking through the forest en route to a lookout at a higher elevation as if it was their very first time doing so. I asked participants to take notice rather than concentrate on simply reaching the destination. As a result, the connections to mindfulness practice were plentiful. During the walk, I fostered discussion regarding the jagged edges of small leaves, loose rocks on the trail, and evidence of large birds of prey nesting in the area.

Afterwards, participants were invited to complete a leaf rubbing drawing using paper and pastels. The embossed impression on the paper made for excellent discussion about the finer details we see when practicing mindfulness and how often we fail to see such details without closer observation. The participants commented that they enjoyed participating in simple art-based activities that encouraged positive feelings. Unsurprisingly, many of the participants stated that participation was reminiscent of creative activities from early childhood echoing what has been established as rationale for the use of arts-based methods with adults: that because artistic expression is often part of our lives as children and because it was something we previously

enjoyed, it is an experience we easily reconnect with again as adults (Rappaport, 2014). Furthermore, during the follow-up interviews, one participant vividly recounted how, on a motorcycle trip after his experience of the group sessions, he had paid closer attention to the smaller details of passing scenery than he normally would have before his introduction to the concept of “beginner’s mind.”

Session Nine

In session nine, we discussed ending the group. Therefore, the activities in this session were focused on summarizing the underlining concepts that had been practiced during the preceding sessions beginning with the introductory concepts underlined by Kabat-Zinn’s definition, such as paying attention, non-judgmentally (self-compassion), learning to focus on the present moment, and broadening further to include continued exploration of thoughts and feelings (self-awareness), the importance of relationships, interdependence and culture. As always, I emphasized the importance of continued practice and reaffirmed participants’ emerging abilities in mindfulness practice to focus on the role of their senses in paying attention, and cultivating appreciation and gratefulness in moment to moment awareness. This was accomplished by repeating the paint to music exercise that participants had previously reported enjoying. As had been done in previous groups, I adapted the activity to foster increased collaboration.

Activities:

Medicine Ball Warm-Up

Mindfulness 101

Pass the Key, Please

Five Changes

Listening for a Minute

Affirmations

Break

Mindfulness Meditation

Collaborative Painting

Closing with Rock

Pass the key, please. In this activity, participants were invited to hold hands in a circle. A common door key was shown to be held in one of the facilitator's hands. The object of the activity is to pass the key around the circle without letting go of each other's hands and without the key falling to the ground. After a successful attempt, the group repeated the activity with their eyes closed and with backs turned to the middle of the circle. In addition to being a new engaging primer activity that fostered group cohesion, the goal of the activity was to provide an opportunity for participants to close their eyes in a safe environment, holding on to the hands of their peers. I linked the activity to the role our senses, in this case hearing, play in receiving information. Participants were encouraged to focus their attention in the present moment on what they could hear as a way to successfully complete the group task of passing the key.

Five changes. The goal of this activity adapted from the original cited by Coholic (2010) was to help participants practice paying attention. In pairs, participants were given instructions to pay attention to their partner carefully noting their physical appearance. This observation period lasted only a minute or so before one of the partners was asked to leave the room momentarily and make five changes to their appearance. For example, a partner rolled up their sleeves, changed their hairstyle, removed a bracelet and untied their shoes. The two participants returned to the room and made guesses about what changes had been made. Next, I facilitated a broader

discussion about how people sometimes pay little attention to the details around them, which can mean that they may miss out on feelings of appreciation and gratefulness when awareness uncovers new observations, knowledge and ideas. This activity offered a way to have this conversation because participants were so eager to participate in figuring out what the changes were with their partner's appearance. Participants were surprised at the subtle nature of many of the changes openly admitting that if they had not paid close attention the changes would have gone unnoticed. This conversation then shifted to what other details we may miss when we are distracted in our daily activities. Again, I was able to link mindfulness practice to the crucial role of our senses in noticing and appreciating the smaller details that we can easily miss when we do not pay attention in our day to day lives.

Affirmations. As a way to underline the concept of cultivating appreciation, participants were invited to create a written affirmation to describe one event that had happened in their lives, one thing they felt comfortable sharing about themselves and one idea that they felt made them a unique person. The goal of this activity was to encourage participants to consider their strengths, hidden talents, and abilities, and to remind them of their inherent self-worth. Given the strong sense of group cohesion, participants' ideas were reciprocated through the positive dialogue of their peers, and affirmed that everyone had different talents and abilities.

Collaborative painting. This activity was a variation of "Paint to Music" that the participants had conducted in an earlier session. The distinction this time was to complete the activity together on one long piece of paper, emphasizing the collaborative nature of the process and outcome. In this way, we were able to encourage practicing being present moment by reminding participants that any focus on what the resulting finished painting might look like could be balanced with moment to moment awareness and appreciation of the details of the

collaborative process. Interestingly, participants in both groups enthusiastically endorsed this idea, I speculate, in part because they enjoyed the painting and because they were excited to create a painting together.

For this activity, two six-foot tables were connected end to end and a long piece of paper was unrolled down the middle. Standing around the table, participants listened and painted while five short (3-minutes each) music clips were played from a pre-recorded playlist. Specifically, participants were encouraged to listen to the music and think about the feelings and/or images that the music created in their minds and to paint them on the paper. During the activity, I periodically asked participants to change positions at the table, emphasizing the importance of perspective-taking. After the final clip, a long discussion ensued about the experience of painting and about the finished piece: the similarities that emerged in the painting during certain songs, and the differences. Participants agreed that the process of painting to music was relaxing and fun but also engrossing. I noticed that while the music was playing participants were very focused on their painting and spoke very little during the activity. In the follow-up discussion, we underlined that music can influence how we feel, and applauded the participants for working together and letting go of any expectations about what the resulting artwork would look like to instead focus on being together in the moment and enjoying the process. Certainly, this appeared to be one of the most popular activities for both groups.

Session Ten

The primary goal of this session was to formally close the group process and repeat the summary of the learning that had taken place. Furthermore, many of the activities chosen for the final session provided opportunities for participants to take a memento home with the hope that participants would more readily transfer the skills and abilities from the group to home

environment if there were objects around that would remind them to practice mindfulness.

Similarly, many of the activities invited participants to reflect on their experience. Finally, a concerted effort was made to facilitate fun collaborative activities that capitalized on the strong sense of group cohesion and support so that participants would leave the group on a positive note.

Activities:

Medicine Ball Warm-Up

Mindfulness 101

Magnets

Egg Drop Auction

Break

Handprints

Wish stick

Closing with Rock

Fridge door magnets. As part of the mindful walking activity, participants had been asked to bring small items such as shells and sea glass back to the group. For this activity, I first facilitated a discussion about the participants' mindful walking experience. Participants reported having had similar experiences: noticing where they would step while walking down a sidewalk, and noticing the same types of objects caught their eye while walking on the beach. Next, the participants were invited to make a fridge door magnet using magnets, superglue and the materials they had brought to group.

In general, these youth enjoyed discussing what was going on in their lives at the group sessions with their peers. This included, for example, talking about their academic classes,

participation in extracurricular activities, and either memories of travelling with their families or sharing excitement about future trips. I equated many of these experiences to accomplishments that could be equated as “fridge door” experiences. I underlined for participants that the purpose of putting a magnet on the fridge door at home was twofold. First, I hoped that seeing the magnet would encourage continued practice of the skills the participants had learned at the group. Second, I discussed with participants the link to the importance of believing in themselves. I encouraged participants to take pride in their accomplishments, such as completing a group about mindfulness. I encouraged participants to hang a piece of their artwork that they had created at the group and underlined that the fridge door was a place to celebrate their successes. Since many youth in care move in and out of foster homes during their young lives, I thought this would offer a new experience of participants. The idea of the magnets would be that participants hang some of their artwork from the group and discuss the purpose of the art activity with members of their household.

Egg drop auction. The goal of this activity was to have fun while working in teams. My co-facilitator acted as an auctioneer while two groups of participants bid on random items such as towels, toilet paper, and a butterfly net. Little explanation as to what the items would be used for was provided. After all the items were auctioned off, each team was given an egg and a time limit with instructions to construct a safe landing pad for an egg to be dropped into. Participants then scrambled to build an apparatus with the auctioned items. Next, both teams gathered to observe how the eggs fared being dropped from various heights. After the drop, I facilitated a discussion about the experience including their ideas about leadership, collaboration, communication, and the importance of having fun while learning and working together.

Handprints. Participants were invited to trace their handprint on a piece of paper then affix the paper to their back. For the next 15 minutes or so, participants took turns writing a positive affirmation on the sheets of paper affixed to their peers' backs. This activity provided an opportunity for participants to share what they appreciated about others in the group. As such, the goal of the activity was to help develop self-esteem and to provide an opportunity to reflect on what they enjoyed about their experience in a group together. The resulting piece of paper with the written affirmations from their peers was taken home.

Wish stick. In the final activity of the closing session, a facilitator brought a small branch with smaller off shooting twigs into the group. Participants were asked to consider the past sessions and think of one wish or dream for their future, and the future of their fellow participants that they hoped would come from their experience of attending the group. This was written on a small slip of paper that was folded many times over and fastened to one of the smaller branches. Participants were advised that the stick would be burned in a ceremonial fashion following the group allowing their dreams to float away into the world around them where they may flourish. The goal of the activity was to encourage reflection and foster hopefulness among participants.